

From Resistance to Reading

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Abstract

Many students who are emergent bilinguals become proficient in English and reading within the dominant skills-based, explicit instruction model for literacy and English language development. Others do not. This article is a case study of one such student's sixth grade transformation from a resistant below-grade-level reader to an enthusiastic, habitual pleasure reader succeeding in advanced English classes. Language acquisition theory, and specifically free voluntary reading (FVR) is presented as a theoretical explanation for the student's experience. Suggestions for implementing FVR in classrooms are offered.

Key words: Emergent bilingual, free voluntary reading, self-selected reading, language acquisition

Jenny's parents moved to the US from Korea as young adults before she was born. Because she lived in a Korean community, heard only Korean at home, and did not attend preschool, Jenny began to learn English when she entered public school. After her family moved to another part of town, Jenny began first grade in a school where no one in her class spoke Korean. She recalls a rough beginning of her school career: "I cried almost every day...and no one could communicate with me. So they just called my parents and my dad would take me out of school for the rest of the day, or he would sit in the classroom with me." From first grade through fifth grade, Jenny was uncomfortable in school and uncomfortable with English; she describes herself as afraid to make mistakes, uninterested, overwhelmed, isolated, in tears, and simply shy.

Jenny's early school experiences with English are characterized by resistance. Jenny's teachers tried to help her learn English with conventional curriculum and teaching methods: direct instruction, worksheets, copying words and sentences in English, and assigned reading. Her second grade teacher, on maternity leave, even returned as a volunteer and worked one-on-one with Jenny. In third grade, Jenny remembers going to the school library, but "I wouldn't know what books to pick, and so my teacher picked my books for me. I don't remember if I read them at all or not. I don't think I did because I don't remember reading at home." In fourth grade, Jenny managed to avoid the traditional California mission project, persuading her father to complete it for her: "I didn't want to do it because I wasn't interested in it." Jenny did not speak up in class, and she cried at home about corrections on her in-class writing, begging to stay home from school.

Concerned about her progress in school, Jenny's parents enrolled her in an afterschool tutoring program, but Jenny resisted adults' efforts there, too. When her tutor gave her a book to read, Jenny pushed it away until finally the tutor let her play an electronic game. However, she relied on the afterschool program to correct her writing assignments: "Someone rewrote them for me or they would fix the spelling mistakes and everything for me."

In the summer, Jenny's mother, whose English was very limited, assigned Jenny to read and write book reports on "grade level" chapter books. Jenny resisted this as well: "I would always pretend I was reading them when my mom was watching me. I would count to, I think I counted to twenty and then I would turn the page.... And then if it was longer I would count to forty in my head." She wrote the book reports required by her mother by copying the paragraphs from the back cover of the book.

Through fifth grade, all the normal instruction and conventional interventions failed to make Jenny a grade-level reader and seemed only to increase her resistance.

I didn't like it when teachers tell me to sound it out because I had an accent...and so I would pronounce it weird...so I just didn't want to read it. If I sounded it out it would take me a really long time because I was not familiar with a lot of the rules...like ph makes the f sound, and I just hated those words. I didn't want to see them at all because I would get confused—like *know* k-n-o-w? I forgot what I did say, but I would never say *know* and no matter how many times my teachers would say, "No, it's know." And I'd say, "No, you spell *know* like n-o." I remember all in fifth grade I was still writing know like n-o instead of like k-n-o-w.

They would always just say, "Sound it out," and I would say, "Okay, like n-o."

Jenny was uncomfortable in school, defensive, and resistant. Even though her teachers seemed to care, the particular kind of social and emotional support that Jenny needed was not present, and she determinedly resisted conventional instruction and adults' efforts to help her progress academically. Jenny was not reading and writing at grade level, well past the oft-cited third grade proficiency goal, and in danger of becoming a long-term English learner (Olsen, 2010).

This all changed in the sixth grade.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THIS STUDY

I interviewed Jenny as part of a larger study that addresses the question, "What is it like to be a successful university student who was classified as an English learner as a child?" I chose Jenny for this study knowing that she could address my general research question, but not knowing about her specific experiences with language development. Rather than beginning with pre-chosen categories within this experience, such as parent involvement, access to English, or peer relationships, my study begins from Jenny's experience in general and allows whatever she talks about to determine the specific content. I interviewed Jenny three times. The first interview focused on her life history, the second on details of her current day-to-day activities, and the third on her interpretation of what it means to be a successful university student who had been classified as an English learner in school (Seidman, 1991). I did not introduce any specific areas for Jenny to talk about within these

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three general topics. For instance, although I began the study with great interest in the role of self-selected reading for emergent bilingual students, I refrained from asking Jenny to talk about self-selected reading. I recorded the interviews, transcribed them, and analyzed them for themes, much as a literary critic would analyze a novel (Van Manen, 1990). The power of reading emerged as a theme in Jenny’s narrative, and since Jenny herself took the initiative to talk about reading, I have added assurance that reading is indeed personally important to Jenny.

Many students who are emergent bilinguals become proficient in English and reading within the current conventional skills-based, explicit instruction model for literacy and English language development. Others, like Jenny, do not. Stephen Krashen’s language acquisition

theory (2003), offers a theoretical explanation for Jenny’s experience. According to Krashen, people acquire oral and written language only by hearing or reading *comprehensible input*—messages in the target language that they understand. Concentrating on the meaning of the message, not the form of the language, allows input to enter the *language acquisition device* (Chomsky, 1965), and language acquisition happens effortlessly. This is how infants learn their first language, and it is what occurs when a traveler returns from a place where a different language is spoken having “picked up” a little of the native language. Ironically, language acquisition happens when a student is not trying to learn a language, and it works best when comprehensible input is so interesting or compelling that she forgets that she is listening or reading in a new language (Krashen, 2011b). Multiple studies comparing language classes based on comprehensible input with language classes based on direct instruction in literacy skills show that comprehensible input is an effective, even superior approach to language and literacy development (Krashen, 2003).

Direct instruction in English language development and literacy skills engages the language *monitor*, resulting in conscious language learning focused on language forms and functions. This is the learning that happens when students intentionally memorize vocabulary and practice grammar forms. To use the monitor for language production, a person must know the language form/rule, focus on the language form/rule (instead of the meaning of the message), and have time think about the language form/rule. These three conditions most frequently are met in a grammar or vocabulary test, possibly in writing, but almost never in conversation. Thus, even though direct skills-based

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instruction can result in conscious language learning (and test scores), it does not result in language acquisition or language fluency (Krashen, 2003). This is why a bright adolescent can diligently study a foreign language in high school for years and still not become fluent.

If a person is anxious, upset, or preoccupied, an *affective filter* prevents comprehensible input from reaching the language acquisition device, and language acquisition is reduced or stopped. It explains why two people can be in the presence of the same comprehensible input but acquire vastly different amounts of language. In first grade, Jenny had a high affective filter. Unable to communicate or understand what was expected of her, she could only cry. Over her first five years in school, Jenny's distinctive emotional dispositions combined with the particular contexts of her early schooling created her characteristic resistant stance to instruction, specifically to English literacy. This delayed Jenny's English development in two ways. First, whatever comprehensible input she did receive was at least partially blocked by the affective filter, slowing her subconscious acquisition of English. Second, because Jenny resisted reading, she did not partake in the special benefits that self-selected reading offers for emergent bilinguals.

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JENNY BECOMES AN INDEPENDENT READER

In sixth grade, Jenny's teacher offered a different social, emotional, and academic environment. Jenny recalls specific strategies her teacher used to gain trust, to help Jenny feel comfortable in school, and specifically to reduce her resistance to reading:

- Instead of returning in-class writing with criticisms (a practice which brought Jenny to tears in fourth grade), Jenny's teacher complimented her writing.
- Students were assigned to illustrate spelling and vocabulary words, and the teacher posted the best ones each week on the bulletin board. After spending hours planning, making rough sketches, and completing final pieces of artwork, Jenny's word-art was displayed frequently. Jenny was recognized for her artwork, began after-school art classes, and became a finalist in the class spelling bee.
- Jenny's teacher read aloud high interest books to the class. She helped Jenny choose books from the Scholastic book orders. During free reading time, Jenny's teacher sat by her and read aloud to her books of Jenny's choosing.

Jenny had always preferred books with enticing

illustrations; her early recollections of books are about memorizing the illustrations in Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. In sixth grade, Jenny continued reading picture books and easy chapter books with illustrations, and her teacher did not pressure her to select "grade level" texts. Jenny even resisted peer pressure to read more advanced books.

I didn't feel comfortable with chapter books, especially the ones without pictures, and so that's why I always chose the Junie B. Jones books and Judy Bloom books, and I just had to see a picture in there.... I remember there's a series of books that was very girl-centered, and my friends would read. And I would never want to read it because it didn't have enough pictures for me. So like my friends would always say, "Read this one, read this book," but I didn't want to.

In this atmosphere of support, acceptance, and freedom, Jenny became an independent reader, both in school and at home.

I started going to the library and picking out my own books. There are so many times when I went to the library and they told me I can't check out this many books. And my mom would tell me, "You're gonna read all this in time?" But I would always read it in time, and she would be like, "When did you read this?" And that's because I would not sleep, and I would finish my book. And even sometimes they were still picture books, but I would still check it out, and I would read that. I remember sometimes I would ask my mom if we could go to the library the next day, and she was like, "Why? You have all these

books." And I was like, "I want more books," and she was like, "You have to read them all first." And so I would race to read it all and then would tell her, "Okay I'm done, and can we go to the library?"

For the first seven months of sixth grade, Jenny read a lot of picture books at home, relaxed in the encouraging atmosphere in her classroom, and enjoyed her teacher's one-on-one read-alouds during free reading time in school.

I think starting the last three months [of sixth grade] was when I actually did the free reading by myself. My teacher stopped reading to me, but she would sit next to me or near me, and I would just read by myself without her, and I wouldn't want her to read to me. I remember she would ask me, "Do you need help reading?" and I would say, "No, I can read it by myself." I think that's when I started to like English.

Not only did Jenny start to like English, she started to excel in English. At the beginning of seventh grade, Jenny was placed in a "regular" English class. Halfway through that year, she was moved to an advanced English class. "I think it's because I spent so much time reading my books." The resistant fifth grader who argued about how to spell *know* became an enthusiastic seventh grader with a strong independent reading habit.

Jenny remained in advanced, honors, and AP English classes throughout her high school years. In high school, Jenny became involved in clubs and activities, and she had less time for reading: "The only time I read during high school for my own pleasure was when school had just started and during the breaks. That was it. Oh, and after the AP exams I would read." After graduation, Jenny

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studied at a university near her home, first majoring in business (her parent's choice) and later switching to liberal arts and education (her own choice). Currently she and her friends even make reading a social event:

Some of my high school friends, we really like reading, and so like once a month we actually go to Barnes and Noble and just read for a day. I always go to the... "What People Are Reading Now" section, and I get like twelve books, and I pick one or two to read. Also if there's a movie trailer and it's based on a book and I really want to watch it, I always try to read the book before I watch the movie because I want to compare it.

At the time of the interviews, Jenny was completing her student teaching in a dual immersion (Korean and English) public school kindergarten. When asked to

reflect on her lived experience, Jenny begins with her pivotal sixth grade year, the affective filter, and the reading habit:

Every time I look back, I'm just really appreciative of the power of reading and books. More than anything, too, every time I think about how I want to teach my classroom, I always think back to my sixth grade teacher, how she got me to start reading and stuff like that. I want to be invested in my students like that and be able to empower them. If I would ever teach English learners—all the exercises that my first, second, third, fourth, fifth grade teachers did with me—I would just give them a book because that's honestly what started to get me to want to read, and that's where I started to really feel comfortable with the English language.... It's all kind of been a part of being able to find the joy of reading. I feel like if I didn't encounter my sixth grade teacher and if she didn't bless me with those books and all that that she did for me, I feel like I would just hate English. I would be miserable.

Jenny's sixth grade teacher lowered Jenny's affective filter and brought her into the world of pleasure reading, which was the entry point for Jenny's success in English and in school.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Free Voluntary Reading (FVR)—reading books of one's own choosing with little to no accountability—meets all the important conditions for language acquisition (Krashen, 2011a). It provides massive amounts of compelling comprehensible input just above the reader's current competence in a pleasant, low

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affective filter situation. While free voluntary readers pay attention to the meaning of what they are reading, they unconsciously and effortlessly acquire the language forms and functions of what they are reading. Krashen provides evidence that developing a habit of reading for pleasure is both a key to advanced language acquisition (Krashen & Williams, 2012) and developing academic language for reading and writing advanced texts (Krashen, 2003). Shin and Krashen (2008) found that sixth grade students participating in a FVR-based summer school program for struggling readers improved in reading comprehension and vocabulary much more than a similar group of sixth graders who participated in a skills-based summer school program.

Even though FVR is simple to manage and important for language and literacy development, it is difficult to include in a school day filled with the demands and milieu of a skills-based curriculum. To establish a FVR program, teachers provide students with three essentials: access to good things to read, time to read, and a place to read.

ACCESS TO GOOD THINGS TO READ

- Access to books for pleasure reading is normally a challenge for children in high-poverty communities. Smith, Constantino, and Krashen (1997) found that

homes, classrooms, schools, and public libraries in Watts, CA, a low-income community, held vastly fewer books for children to read than homes, classrooms, schools, and public libraries in Beverly Hills, CA. Maintaining a generous classroom library is a good way for teachers to address this inequity. Building a teacher-owned classroom library does not need to be expensive. Teachers find bargains at library sales, thrift stores, and yard sales. A public library is a good source for acquiring a rotating selection of different books each month. Studies in developing countries have shown that providing a classroom library of as few as 100 high interest picture books along with book-based teaching strategies is enough to promote and accelerate literacy development in English (Elley, 1998).

- Young emergent readers (usually P-1) enjoy read-alouds in small, informal settings reminiscent of a home setting. A teacher, adult volunteer, or cross-age tutor reads aloud books that students choose with individual students or small groups. Young students also enjoy time with books in a classroom library or a “book box” that sits on a shared table. Eventually, emergent readers begin to read familiar books alone or with a peer. When young readers share a book, a rule that only one person holds and touches the book helps prevent torn pages.

- Beginning and fluent readers (usually grades 2 and up) also benefit from a convenient classroom library. Depending on scheduled class trips to a school library does not provide enough access for students to try out a wide variety of books.
- Limiting students to a particular “level” or genre of books is unnecessary and reduces choice and motivation (Krashen, 2001). Part of being an independent reader is to trying out and choosing one’s own books from a wide variety of genres and levels. Students do not stick with a steady diet of too-difficult books (frustrating!) or too-easy books (boring!). Teacher and peer acceptance of easy or difficult book choices gives students freedom to find intrinsically motivating texts.
- Including popular-culture books in a classroom library is inviting to otherwise reluctant readers who enjoy movies, video games, and sports. Including book series provides opportunities for students to engage in *narrow reading*. Besides being highly motivating, narrow reading provides rich opportunities for developing vocabulary and language forms (Krashen, 2004). Even re-reading favorite and comfortable books can be important for readers (Trelease, 2006). Including multicultural books and books in students’ first languages provides emergent bilinguals an opportunity to belong to the club of readers (Smith, 2006) and develop their Common Underlying Proficiency (Cummins, 2000) of literacy and language in their first languages and English.

TIME TO READ

- FVR should be part of the regular day for everyone, not

only for students who finish other work quickly.

- Be patient. It may take a few weeks for some students to realize that reading can be pleasurable, find something they want to read, and settle into a FVR routine.
- Incorporate a social element into FVR time. Students can share book recommendations in a class discussion, leave written recommendations for classmates on sticky notes, or form impromptu book clubs. A teacher can begin FVR time with a book talk to generate interest in a new or neglected selection.

A PLACE TO READ, PHYSICALLY AND METAPHORICALLY

- Provide a comfortable physical place for students to read. Some teachers invite students to sit on the floor or other places in the classroom besides their desks for FVR.
- Provide metaphorical space for FVR by accepting students’ choices in books they read and requiring little to no accountability for reading FVR books. Book reports, quizzes, and even reading logs can turn pleasure reading into a chore. If your main goal is to inspire students to become habitual pleasure readers, FVR should be about time spent reading self-selected texts, not completing assignments about them. To build an independent reading habit at home, allow and encourage students to take books home once they get interested during school-time FVR.
- Refrain from giving prizes or recognition for reading accomplishments. Prizes tell students that adults believe reading is not interesting by itself. Accumulating points and winning rewards can become more important to students than enjoying reading. (Kohn, 1999)

- For a description of how one sixth grade teacher builds her entire reading curriculum on self-selected reading, see *The Book Whisperer* (Miller, 2009). For a description of a summer school program based on self-selected reading, see *Summer Reading: Program and Evidence* (Shin and Krashen, 2008).

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