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THE **POWER** OF **READING**

Insights from the Research

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Free voluntary reading (FVR) means reading because you want to. For school-age children, FVR means no book report, no questions at the end of the chapter, and no looking up every vocabulary word. FVR means putting down a book you don't like and choosing another one instead. It is the kind of reading highly literate people do obsessively all the time.

I will not claim that FVR is the complete answer. Free readers are not all guaranteed admission to Harvard Law School. What the research tells me is that if children or less literate adults start reading for pleasure, however, good things will happen. Their reading comprehension will improve, and they will find difficult, academic-style texts more comprehensible. Their writing style will improve, and they will be better able to write prose in a style that is acceptable to schools, business, and the scientific community. Their vocabulary will improve and will improve at a better rate than if they took one of the well-advertised vocabulary building courses. Also, their spelling and control of grammar will improve.

Several studies confirm that those who read more in their second language also write better in that language (Salyer 1987; Janopoulos 1986; Kaplan and Palhinda 1981) and studies also show a relationship between measures of amount read and spelling performance (for first language acquisition, Stanovich and West 1989; for second language acquisition, Polak and Krashen 1988).

The relationship between reported free voluntary reading and literacy development is not always large, but it is remarkably consistent. Nearly every study that has examined this relationship has found a correlation, and it is present even when different tests, different methods of probing reading habits, and different definitions of free reading are used.

Those who read in a second language write and spell better in that language.

The relationship between reported FVR and literacy is remarkably consistent.

My conclusions are simple. When children read for pleasure, when they get "hooked on books," they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called "language skills" many people are so concerned about: They will become adequate readers, acquire a large vocabulary, develop the ability to understand and use complex grammatical constructions, develop a good writing style, and become good (but not necessarily perfect) spellers. Although free voluntary reading alone will not ensure attainment of the highest levels of literacy, it will at least ensure an acceptable level. Without it, I suspect that children simply do not have a chance.

When second language acquirers read for pleasure, they develop the competence they need to move from the beginning "ordinary conversational" level to a level where they can use the second language for more demanding purposes, such as the serious study of literature, business, and so on. When they read for pleasure, they can continue to improve in their second language without classes, without teachers, without study, and even without people to converse with.⁵

When we read, we really have no choice—we must develop literacy. We rarely find well-read people who have serious problems with grammar, spelling, and so on. They write acceptably well because they can't help it; they have subconsciously acquired good writing style as well as the conventions of writing.

I am not, however, proposing a language program consisting only of free reading. I also recognize the value of reading that is assigned by teachers and recommended by teachers, librarians, and parents. A language arts class, in my view, is primarily a literature class. Assigned reading and free voluntary reading will help each other: Through literature, students will grow intellectually and be exposed to a wider variety of books, which can stimulate more free reading. In fact, one of the ways we know that a literature program is effective is if it results in more free voluntary reading. In turn, free voluntary reading will help build language competence and contribute to intellectual growth, which will make literature more comprehensible and meaningful.

Our problem in language education, as Frank Smith has pointed out, is that we have confused cause and effect. We have assumed that we first learn language "skills" and then apply these skills to reading and writing. But that is not the way the human brain works. Rather, reading for meaning, reading about things that matter to us, is the cause of literate language development.

If this view is even partially correct, it means that we need to create a print-rich environment both inside and outside of school. It means that teachers need to be assured that creating such an environment will make their jobs easier, not harder, and will give more satisfying results.⁶

Children who are readers will develop acceptable levels of literacy.

Without a reading habit, children simply do not have a chance.

People acquiring a second language have the best chance for success through reading.

Well-read people write well because they have subconsciously acquired good writing style.

FVR is not a replacement for the language program. FVR complements language arts classes.

We have confused cause and effect.

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