

Making Reading Content Comprehensible for Intermediate Language Learners

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Abstract

Due to the interrelatedness of reading and language learning, assisting language learners in becoming voluntary readers sets them on a path to second language fluency. However, language teachers must first scaffold reading experiences for their students in order to develop their skills and confidence in reading in a new language. This article provides specific examples and the theoretical framework of the before, during, and after reading activities language teachers can employ to scaffold their intermediate foreign language students' early efforts at reading and viewing narrative material in the target language.

Key Words: language acquisition, classroom techniques, reading, film, and poetry

Your intermediate language learners have entered your classroom from beginning level courses ready to make the next step in their quest for foreign language fluency. The research suggests the best method language teachers can undertake to help students become true intermediate language users, able to use the language outside the classroom in everyday situations, is to teach them to become voluntary readers of material in the target language (Krashen 2004). However, language teachers must provide adequate scaffolds to ensure students can access reading content during early efforts at reading in the target language. Language teachers can make reading comprehensible by incorporating before, during, and after reading activities designed to build vocabulary, introduce grammatical structures, provide visual connections, and develop schemata. Ideally, the reading experiences enjoyed by the students in the classroom lead to the development of students who read for pleasure and knowledge in their free time.

Foreign Language Literacy Development

Language acquisition comes from comprehensible input (Krashen 1983). Therefore, the same literacy development techniques utilized in first language acquisition, work equally well in second language acquisition. Hearing and discussing children's picture books in a child's early years of formal schooling greatly impacted their literacy development in their native language. The commonly used vocabulary development, comprehension, and reading fluency development activities that scaffold early reading experiences in first language acquisition – for example, echo reading, choral reading, paired reading, and readers theater - should also be used in second language acquisition. Echo reading involves a fluent reader, often the teacher, reading a sentence or logical chunk of text aloud and the learners repeating - echoing the pronunciation, rate, and rhythm of the fluent reader. Choral reading involves the students and teacher reading the same text in unison, like singers in a choir singing the same material together. Paired reading or partner reading involves students reading aloud to each other in pairs. Readers theater provides students, working in groups, the opportunity to develop a script based on a text read in class. Then, the students, reading directly from their newly created script based on the original text, perform their piece in front of the class. Repeating these activities in the rereading of children's picture books allows students to move from single word fixations to reading phrases of meaningful units in a single fixation, thereby, improving reading rate, expression, and ease of reading (Cohen 2011).

Talking about and eliciting students' reactions to the setting, characters, plot, and themes of these stories increases their comprehension of the material. These activities coupled with limited direct teaching of grammatical structures and vocabulary at the point of need can support natural language acquisition, especially for older students. These first language teaching techniques work equally well on children and adults alike in second language acquisition (Krashen 2004). Furthermore, scaffolding new reading experiences reduces students' anxiety and makes the reading experience fun for students, thereby, lowering the affective filter which allows for natural language acquisition. Finally, exposing language students to reading begins the development of their own writing style as they absorb the structures of writing modeled by the writers of the books they read.

Poetry

Besides offering students an enjoyable reading experience, poetry provides language learners with rich learning opportunities in language, content, and culture. The

rhythm, rhyme, familiar language patterns (found in poetry in song lyrics and poetry in the students' native language), and repetition of key words and phrases in poetry provides support for students learning the language utilized in the poem. Reading and rereading poetry aloud promotes the development of sight word vocabulary, pronunciation, and reading fluency. This activity mimics native language learners developing the same skills by singing nursery rhymes in the early grades of their school-based learning. In addition, the conciseness of poetry provides a bridge to transition into more complex and longer texts. Narrative poetry contains the elements of fiction – setting, characters, conflict, plot, theme, and point of view – in a concise, expressive format perfectly suited to teach in one class period. Finally, studying the poetry of published poets leads naturally to students creating poetry based on own experiences, emotions, and beliefs.

Selecting Poetry

When selecting poetry for classroom use, language teachers must consider their students' independent, instructional, and frustration reading levels. With scaffolding provided by the teacher, poetry at the students' instructional level can introduce students to new vocabulary, phrases, and content in the target language. Poetry for beginner/intermediate language students should consist of an accessible format, simple grammatical structures, manageable vocabulary, easily recognizable imagery, and minimal use of figurative language. Poetry written in simple language - based on familiar, everyday experiences – can evoke the readers' senses as powerfully as more complex poetry.

Classes for advanced language learners should resemble language arts classes for native speakers (Krashen 2004). Therefore, a teacher-scaffolded study of poetry containing figurative language, multifaceted themes, and cultural references can provide intermediate language learners the opportunity to interact with the target language in a progressively more sophisticated manner.

Before Reading Activities

The key tenet of second language acquisition is to provide students with comprehensible input (Krashen 1977). Therefore, language teachers must establish their students' instructional reading levels for in-class guided reading activities and their independent reading levels for free reading during sustained silent reading sessions. Texts at a student's instructional reading level contain content accessible by the student with scaffolding provided by the teacher. Texts at a student's independent reading level contain content readily accessible by the student. The greatest language gains occur when students read material with the assistance of a teacher just beyond their independent comprehension level (Vygotsky as cited in Berk & Winsler (1995) & Krashen 1987).

Thematic prereading activities that build students' prior knowledge and introduce potentially prohibitive vocabulary prepare language students to read texts at their instructional reading level. Language teachers can screen excerpts from films and documentaries to establish the cultural and historical significance of the novel or poem they intend to read during the guided reading session with the class. Also, displaying photos of the setting of the novel or poem provides students with visual images to draw upon during later reading. An introduction to potentially prohibitive vocabulary should include visual images and contextual uses of the vocabulary.

Finally, a discussion of the genre of the novel or poem builds a link to the students' first language conceptual knowledge that can easily transfer to a second language.

During Reading Activities

Language teachers can scaffold the first reading of a novel or poem with visual and audio support. Electronic children's picture books and dramatic interpretations of novels and poems are readily available online. Scaffold a second reading of a book or poem with audio support, for example, utilizing audio books, choral reading, echo reading, and paired reading. Class discussions, led by the language teacher, should include plot specific topics related to the setting, characters' personalities, physical appearance and motivations, and making predictions. Complex topics of theme, voice, and figurative elements can wait. Enjoy the story for the story.

After Reading Activities

After reading narrative poetry, class discussion topics could include the poem's themes, message, most startling lines, most vivid images, and poetic devices. As a comprehension assessment, students could work in pairs to paraphrase/summarize an assigned stanza of a narrative poem. Encouraging students to watch films based on the poetry and poets studied in the classroom reinforces acquired language and can encourage students to become avid viewers of subtitled films in the target language. In addition, acquiring the skills to understand and appreciate the literary content of poetry in the target language provides students with the tools to similarly access the poetic content of foreign language films. Research indicates that students who enjoy a good story on the silver screen equally enjoy high quality tales told on the pages of a book (Krashen 2004).

Free Voluntary Reading

One of the best ways to acquire a second language is through reading engaging materials in the target language. According to Krashen (2006), "Free reading is the source of our reading prowess and much of our vocabulary and spelling development, as well as our ability to understand sophisticated phrases and write coherent prose" (par. 2). Reading builds language structures, contributes to schema development, and establishes a language base for written and oral language skills. Krashen's (2004) review of 41 research studies on Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) revealed that FVR improves: reading comprehension (both narrative and expository), writing style, vocabulary, spelling, control of grammar, oral/aural language skills, second language acquisition, and reading speed. In order to expose language learners to the powerful effects of reading, language teachers must establish an educational environment conducive to free voluntary reading. Language teachers should focus on the enjoyable aspects of reading - entertainment, learning about humanity, relaxation, and escape - rather than peripheral activities like book reports, end of chapter questions, and vocabulary exercises. Language learners should feel free to choose their own books and change books if they find the book uninteresting (Krashen 2004). Reading for pleasure reduces students' anxiety, thereby, lowering their affective filter. Lowering the effective filter is a key instructional methodology in creating an environment that allows students to acquire language skills subconsciously.

Language teachers, who provide the structure for Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) sessions, expose students to a wide variety of reading material, assist students in

selecting books at their independent reading level, and read books during SSR to model the activity. Finally, establishing sustained silent reading sessions as a regular part of language instruction provides students with a fun, powerful language acquisition tool they can utilize outside the classroom.

Conclusion

Once students develop the skills and confidence to read for enjoyment in a new language, massive language gains, enjoyment, and lifelong learning follow. Scaffolding reading experiences and providing access to gateway literary materials – including audio books, children’s picture books, comic books, graphic novels, teen romance novels, magazines, and electronic books –promote additional free voluntary reading. School based sustained silent reading programs promote pleasure/free-time reading. Language teachers’ best practice to support students to achieve genuine language fluency is to encourage and support students to read for pleasure in the target language. This best practice includes providing students with interesting, comprehensible reading and viewing materials in the target language, scaffolding reading and viewing experiences of material that is just beyond students’ independent reading level, and being a positive reading role model by reading, enjoying, and talking about books, poetry, and films in the target language. Finally, language teachers should also encourage students to become avid readers in their first language because advanced literacy skills in one language transfer to acquiring literacy in additional languages.

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