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Should We Encourage E-Reading?

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ABSTRACT

So far, research confirms that "e-reading" can be helpful for the acquisition of language and literacy. Because of the high cost of e-readers and e-books, however, those living in poverty are unable to take advantage of e-reading. A push toward increasing e-book offerings in libraries will have the effect of making the gap between the rich and poor wider than it is now, unless the cost of e-readers is dramatically reduced or the availability of e-readers is dramatically increased.

It is firmly established that self-selected pleasure reading is tremendous help to language development, perhaps the best way to help acquirers progress from beginning stages to the most advanced stages. The research, until recently, has been confined to reading paper print. There is, however, reason to suspect that self-selected e-reading can have a similar impact.

Pratheeba and Krashen (2013) reported a substantial correlation (r = .78) for advanced speakers of English as a second language (25 students of engineering at a university in India) between self-reported reading and a vocabulary test consisting of words taken from Graduate Record Examination preparation books, designed for native speakers of English.

Their 20-item questionnaire included four items dealing with reading from the computer, but only one of these dealt specifically with pleasure reading: the correlation between vocabulary scores and pleasure reading on the internet was modest, but it was positive and significant (r = .35, p = .044). Other forms of reading using the computer (reading about current affairs, reading for academic purposes, reading online journals) were not significantly correlated with vocabulary scores, confirming the power of self-selected reading (Lee, 2007).

Wang and Lee (2015) asked university students of EFLin Taiwan to engage in web-surfing in English for 20 minutes at a time at least once a week for one academic year. Surfers made better gains ontests of knowledge of infrequently occurring words (those appearing once every 10,000 words in texts) and academic words and also did better than comparisons on a cloze test. Their reading was clearly self-selected and

related to their own interests. One subject told Wang and Lee: "I think I can really pick what I like and disregard my dislikes. Then, I'll choose what I really want for sure. I definitely won't choose something I'm not interested in."

The Barrier

E-book reading in the US is far more frequent among those with higher incomes (table 1), most likely due to the cost of e-book reading devices and e-books themselves.

Table 1: Percentage who have read a print or e-book in the last 12 months.

income	print book	e-book
below 30,000	69	19
30,000 - 49,999	68	26
50,000 - 74,999	69	33
above 75,000	73	40

N = 1520 adults, March, 2016
From: Pew Research Center, 2016

Table 2 shows that those earning under $30,000 per year in 2015 were less likely to own e-book reading devices and computers.

Table 2: Percentage of adults with E-Book-Readers, tablets, computers, smartphones:

	Computers	Smartphone	E-Readers	Tablets
Below 30	50	52	14	28
30-49,999	80	69	16	44
50-74,999	90	76	22	51
75 & more	91	87	27	67

Pew Research Center, 2015.
n = 959 adults, interview during March/April 2015.

The official 2017 household income poverty line in the US was $20,600 for a family of four: If one of two wage earners in the family earns anywhere close to $30,000, this means that the "below $30,000" category includes families that are well above the poverty line. E-book use and ownership of e-reading devices among those living in poverty is probably much lower than the figures given in tables 1 and 2.

The Price of E-Book Readers

Most new e-book readers cost at least $80 US. But the good news is that e-books can now be read on other devices such as computers, smartphones and tablets. Because of this, sales of dedicated e-book readers, such as Kindles and Nooks, have declined (Haines, 2016). But computers, smartphones and tablets are not inexpensive, and as presented in table 2 fewer low-income adults own these devices.

E-Book Prices

Four of the five best-selling adult fiction books in the United States, as listed in the New York Times in January, 2017, sold for $14.99 and one sold for $10.99 on Amazon, sometimes less than the paperback versions and sometimes more.

These prices do not take into consideration the fact that e-books generally cannot be shared. Amazon allows some, but not all sharing of kindle books with friends for 14 days, but this can only be done once per book, and customers can't read the book while their friend has it.

Also, there is no used book possibility for e-books. Donations of used print books by individuals through organizations such as book swap groups can make significantly more books available in public and school libraries (Krashen, 2014).

Are Libraries the Solution?

While many public libraries in the United States include e-books, they make up on the average only 12% of the entire collection, and account for only 3% of public library circulation (Romano, 2015a). Most (69%) of the e-books in public libraries are aimed at adults. Similarly, only 2% of school library collections are e-books and account for only 3% of total circulation (Romano, 2015b).

Public libraries in the United States provide a modest amount of help for those without e-book readers or computers at home: 38% of public libraries have e-book readers that patrons can take home (Romano, 2015a). Rideout and Katz (2016) reported that 36% of adults living below the poverty line said they used computers at libraries, compared to 23% of those living above the poverty line. Twenty-four percent of school libraries provide e-book reading devices for students (Romano, 2015b).

Lack of access to books and other reading material is the major reason those living in poverty have lower levels of literacy (McQuillan, 1998; Krashen, 2004): Young people living in poverty have fewer books in the home, in local libraries, and in their schools.Pushing e-reading by increasing library e-book offerings will not solve this problem

Because of the high price of e-books and e-book readers, those living in poverty have little or no chance to engage in e-reading. In fact, promoting e-reading could make the situation worse: an increase is e-book offerings in libraries, without a substantial decrease in the cost of e-book readers or a plan to make e-readers universally available, will increase the gap between the rich and the poor. E-books will be available to the

more privileged but not to those without access to e-readers of some kind.

This has already happened: Those surveyed in Romano (2015b) were asked an open-ended question about interest, or lack of interest, students showed for e-books. Here is one answer: "A lot of our students come from low income homes and don't have a way to read these titles." (p. 31).

Summary

Self-selected voluntary e-reading appears to result in language acquisition, but promoting e-reading may not close the achievement gap unless steps are taken to make e-books and e-book readers more affordable.

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