Applied Language Learning
1994, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 95-100

RESEARCH REPORT

Reading versus Grammar: What Students Think is Pleasurable for Language Acquisition

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Most second language (L2) acquisition theorists assign an important role to the learner's attitudes and affect in the acquisition process. This study examines the attitudes of 49 L2 students toward two language acquisition activities: grammar exercises and the extensive reading of popular literature. Students who had participated in courses based on both approaches were asked which activity was most beneficial for language acquisition, and which was more pleasurable. By a significant margin, students favored reading over grammar in both respects. Implications for L2 instructions are discussed.

Krashen (1994) has proposed a Pleasure Hypothesis for language acquisition stating that activities which are good for language acquisition are usually perceived of by acquirers as pleasant (p. 1). Other theorists and researchers have also emphasized the importance of positive affect in language acquisition (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Mueller & Miller, 1970, Oller, Hudson, & Liu, 1977; and Schumann & Schumann, 1977). There is an abundance of evidence supporting the notion that reading is at least as effective, if not more so, than traditional grammar and skill-building activities in promoting first and second language acquisition. Krashen (1993) reviews several studies in which reading in this case, self-selected pleasure reading was compared to skill building and grammar instruction in L1 and L2 classrooms. He found that in 38 of the 41 studies, students in the reading classes did as well as or better than the comparison skill-building and/or grammar-focused groups. Elley (1991) conducted a large scale study using book-based programs in Singapore with 3,000 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The experimental book-based classes outperformed students in grammer-based classes in nearly every area of language performance, including reading comprehension, grammer, listening comprehension and writing.

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There is also a good deal of evidence that reading is perceived as pleasurable by students who participate in L1 art programs based on literature (Sperlz, 1948; Petre, 1971; Davis & Lucas, 1971; Gray, 1969). Extensive reading, however, is not commonly used in beginning and intermediate classrooms, at least not in a foreign language (FL) setting (Huber, 1993), so there has been little opportunity to measure student preferences. This study examines how L2 students exposed to two distinct classroom activities—the learning of grammar and the extensive reading of popular literature—view them in terms of pleasure and benefits in language acquisition.

The Study

Two groups of L2 students were used in the study. Group 1 consisted of 16 third semester, university level ESL (English as a Second Language) students (M = 5, F = 11; median age = 27.5) studying at an intensive ESL program in the United States. Group 2 was comprised of thirty-three third semester, university-level SFL (Spanish as a Foreign Language) students (M = 12, F = 21; median age = 23). Both the ESL and the SFL students participated in a ten-week course in the extensive reading of popular literature in their respective second languages. All students in the study were assigned to their level on the basis of a common proficiency exam for their respective programs. Students were not informed that their section would be using popular literature as a component of the curriculum. Thus, while the selection was not random, no student was aware of the experimental nature of the courses before signing up, avoiding a self-selection bias in the sample.

Both courses consisted of the students reading newspapers, magazines, short stories, graded readers, and (for the Group 1 of ESL students) novels, and discussing them in class. The popular literature was mostly assigned, chosen by the instructors based upon previous experiences with L2 classes and student interests. Some students also read self-selected materials outside of class. Group 1 received no grammar instruction in the 10 week session; Group 2 spent less than 15 percent of class time on grammar explanations. All the students in both groups, however, had been exposed to traditional grammar and skill building activities in at least one previous or concurrent university L2 course, providing them with a basis with which to compare their literature-based course activities.

At the end of the quarter, students were asked to fill out a short survey on their preferences, indicating which activities they found pleasurable and which they found beneficial for language learning. While no pre-treatment survey was given to the two groups, previous research in other settings (Harlow & Muyskens, 1994) has found that L2 students ranked reading and grammar about the same in terms of preferred classroom activities. The present survey included close-ended questions in which students were asked to choose only one of the options listed (see questions below). This produced a count for each of the options, a count which was then subjected to statistical analysis. The three questions relevant to this study were:

(a) Based upon your experience in this class and other second language classes, which do you believe is most pleasurable: assigned readings, self-selected reading, or grammar?
(b) Based upon your experience in this class and other second language classes, which do you believe is most beneficial for your becoming fluent in your second language: assigned readings, self-selected reading, or grammar?
(c) Given a choice between reading popular literature and studying grammar, which would you prefer to do?

A Chi-square analysis of the responses of the two groups found no statistically significant differences between them, so the results were combined and are summarized in *Tables 1, 2,* and *3.*

TABLE 1
Student Attitudes on Reading vs. Grammar: Most Beneficial (N = 49)

Assigned Popular Reading	Self-Selected Reading	Combined Reading1	Grammar Instruction
51% (25)	27% (13)	78% (38)	22% (11)

1 = Assigned Popular Reading plus Self-Selected Responses

TABLE 2
Student Attitudes on Reading vs. Grammar: Most Pleasurable (N = 49)

Assigned Popular Reading	Self-Selected Reading	Combined Reading1	Grammar Instruction
55% (27)	29% (14)	84% (41)	16% (8)

1 = Assigned Popular Reading plus Self-Selected Responses

TABLE 3
Student Preferences on Reading vs. Grammar (N = 49)

Reading	Grammar Instruction
80% (39)	20% (10)

Table 1 shows which activity students considered most beneficial. Reading is clearly the favorite, with 78 percent of the students choosing either the assigned popular reading or self-selected categories. The difference between the Combined Reading (assigned popular reading plus self selected) and Grammar Instruction categories was statistically significant from chance (Chi-square = 6.97 [Yate's Correction for Continuity applied], df = 1, $p < .01$). *Table 2* shows that students exposed to both reading and grammar also consider the former to be more pleasurable. Again, the results of the Combined Reading and Grammar cells were compared and found to differ significantly from chance (Chi-square = 11.16 [Yate's Correction for Continuity applied], df = 1, $p < .001$). Finally, *Table 3* summarizes student preferences in choosing between traditional grammar instruction and popular reading in the L2 classroom, with reading the favorite of 80 percent of the students. These results are also significantly different from chance (Chi-square = 8.23 [Yate's Correction for Continuity applied], df = 1, $p < .005$).

Discussion

The instructors for both courses noted that student enthusiasm and interest in learning the L2 was greatly improved over the general level shown by students in previous grammar-oriented courses. The preference of students for assigned versus self-selected reading may seem unusual, but the instructors reported that the vast bulk of the assigned texts were well-liked materials that had been popular with previous students. Given a choice between reading enjoyable materials supplied by the instructor and having to search for new reading matter, students may be indicating both their enjoyment of the texts supplied and their convenience. Students were not given a choice among the assigned texts, but could do additional reading which they self-selected. In any case, given an opportunity to experience both popular reading materials and grammar instruction, the overwhelming majority of the students found reading to be superior to traditional instruction not only in terms of pleasure, but also in perceived benefits in language acquisition.

It is important to point out that all of the subjects in this study had an opportunity to read popular L2 literature in and outside the classroom, a situation not common in other beginning and intermediate FL courses, as noted above. This may help explain why other measures of student preferences in L2 classroom activities differ from the present study's results. In Harlow and Muyskens (1994), for example, subjects ranked reading seventh and grammar ninth in importance in the FL classroom, suggesting only a marginal preference for reading. There is no indication, however, that students in the survey had much contact with L2 reading in their classes. Further study is needed to determine whether these preferences vary according to level. It may be, for example, that students at beginning levels perceive a greater need for grammar instruction than those in intermediate classes. Here again, however, it would be necessary to make sure students have exposure to a both reading and grammar, a point emphasized in this study.

The results lend support to Krashen's Pleasure Hypothesis, in so far as reading is both good for acquisition and perceived as more pleasurable than other equally or

less effective methods of L2 instruction, such as grammar activities. It should be noted that while Krashen states that activities which are good for acquisition are also pleasurable, the reverse is not necessarily true. An activity that is pleasurable may not be aiding in acquisition. Given the evidence in support of reading in promoting first and second language acquisition, however, it seems prudent that L2 instructors consider the use of extensive reading with popular literature in their classrooms in order to foster positive affect and more enjoyable environments for acquiring a second language.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Lucy Tse for her help in collecting data and for her comments on this paper. I would similarly like to thank Steve Krashen for his suggestions on an initial draft of this article.

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