Heritage Language Development

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6. The Use of Self-Selected and Free Voluntary Reading in Heritage Language Programs: A Review of Research

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The number of secondary schools and universities offering courses designed especially for heritage language (HL) speakers has increased dramatically in recent years (Collisten, 1994). Despite the appearance of a number of theoretical frameworks on how to approach HL instruction (Valdes, 1995; Merino, Trueba, and Sanmaniego, 1993) and the publication of several textbooks and proposed curricula ranging from traditional grammar instruction (Gonzales and Gonzales, 1991; Blanco, 1994; Sole, 1994) to communicative approaches (Roca, 1994), there has been little formal evaluation of the effectiveness of any of these methods.

One exception is a small body of research on the promotion of self-selected, pleasure reading—what Krashen (1993) calls "free voluntary reading" (FVR)—in HL classes. This chapter reviews the literature on the use of FVR and self-selected reading with HL students, and discuss at what age and under what conditions HL courses may be most effective.

Access, Free Voluntary Reading, and Heritage Language Acquisition

Studies of language minority students in the United States have found that HL speakers often have extremely limited access to HL reading materials at home, in school, and in the community (Constantino, 1994; McQuillan, in press; Pucci, 1994). Research has shown that more access to books leads to more reading, and more reading results in higher levels of grammatical accuracy, a larger vocabulary, and greater reading comprehension (Krashen, 1993). One of the principle challenges in maintaining and developing HL literacy, then, is increasing access to interesting, comprehensible HL texts in a low-risk environment.

Teachers have different options in providing students access to comprehensible reading materials. Table 1 lists three possibilities, labeled according to current use of these terms.[1]

Table 1
Options in Providing Comprehensible Reading

Type	Self-Selected?	Accountability?
Sustained Silent Reading	yes	no
"Literature"	no	yes
"Self-Selected Reading"	yes	yes

All three methods can be successful if they provide interesting, comprehensible texts to students. Sustained silent reading (SSR), where students select their own reading materials and are not held accountable for what they read, has been found to be consistently effective (Krashen, 1993). "Literature," traditionally assigned reading that students are graded on, can work if texts are sufficiently interesting to the students (McQuillan and Conde, 1996). The third option, "Self-Selected Reading," where students choose the books but are evaluated in some way on their reading (e.g. keeping a reading log, writing a report), can also be effective if accountability is kept to a minimum.

Research on programs which increase access to texts and promote self-selected and free reading among HL students confirms that this approach can indeed be very successful. Table 2 summarizes the results of seven studies of reading programs which included these elements for HL (Spanish/English) bilinguals. (Note that while "heritage language" students are usually those who have already acquired English, I have also included one study, Schon, Hopkins and Davis (1982), which used students in an elementary bilingual program.)

Elementary and Secondary School Studies

In this first study in table 2, Schon, Hopkins and Davis (1982), free reading was provided to elementary Spanish/English bilingual students via a sustained silent reading program. The six experimental group teachers gave their second, third, and fourth grade HL students at least sixty minutes per week to read on their own in Spanish, or an average of about ten minutes per day, for eight months. The classes were provided with an extensive collection of Spanish language books selected for their high interest and easy texts. The control group participated in

Table 2

Studies Comparing HL Instruction Using Self-Selected/Sustained Silent Reading and Traditional Approaches for Spanish/English Bilinguals

Study	Subjects	Measure	Results
Schon, Hopkins & Davis (1982)	2nd-4th graders n = 93	RC Vocab. Attitudes toward reading	Grade 2: SSR superior in vocab. equivalent in RC Grades 3.4: SSR superior on vocab. and RC Combined grades: SSR superior on attitudes toward reading
Schon, Hopkins & Vojir (1985)	7th-8th graders n = 400	RC Vocab. Attitudes	Grade 8: SSR superior in vocab.; equivalent on all other measures
Schon, Hopkins & Vojir (1984) (Tempe)	9th-12th graders n = 68	RC Attitudes	Equivalent gains for both SSR and traditional groups
Schon, Hopkins & Vojir (1984) (Chandler)	10th-12th graders n = 30	RC Attitude	Equivalent gains for both SSR and traditional groups
Rodrigo (1995)	University students n = 6	Vocab. Attitudes	Gains in vocab. and more positive attitudes; no controls
McQuillan (1996)	University students n = 39	Vocab. Attitudes	Equivalent on HL attitudes; significant gains in vocab. (no control group on vocab.)
McQuillan (1996)	University students n = 28	Amount of HL reading	SSR group reading more 7 months after treatment than comparison group

RC = reading comprehension

the regular language arts curriculum of the school during these same sixty minutes. Schon et al. report that all of the children in the study were primarily from low socio-economic areas of Tempe, Arizona. No information was provided as to the percentage of students who were Spanish dominant versus those who were English dominant.

The researchers found that five of the six experimental group teachers were very enthusiastic about the program, and that their students liked reading the books. One teacher commented that the students enjoyed "sharing stories with each other and reading aloud to the class" (p. 14). Standardized reading comprehension and vocabulary measures were administered before and after the treatment to both groups. The SSR group outscored the control classes in grade two on vocabulary (effect size = .63), and made equivalent gains in reading comprehension. For the third and fourth grade groups, the SSR students made significantly greater gains on both measures, with moderate to large effect sizes (.69 for reading comprehension, 1.1 for vocabulary). The analysis of the reading attitudes survey combined all three grades, and again the SSR group made significantly greater gains over the control group, with a modest effect size (.39).

In Schon, Hopkins and Vojir (1985), sixteen seventh- and eighth-grade remedial reading classes which contained both Mexican American students as well as recent immigrants were provided with access to popular Spanish reading materials and given 45 minutes of SSR each week in place of their regular English language arts time for eight and a half months. The control group students were the previous year's cohort of seventh- and eighth-graders, who received no SSR and did not have access to the Spanish materials. As in their other studies, Schon et al. asked the teachers to encourage bilingual students in the SSR groups to read in Spanish. The vast majority of the Spanish bilinguals came from low income areas in the city (Tempe, Arizona).

The researchers administered tests of Spanish reading comprehension, Spanish reading speed, Spanish vocabulary, and attitudes toward reading. In addition, the data were analyzed to investigate whether teacher assignment affected the outcomes, and whether those enrolled in a "Spanish for Native Speaker" (SNS) class responded more favorably to the treatment than those who were not.

Schon et al. report that the results of the intervention were mixed. The seventh-grade SSR groups did marginally better than the control groups on Spanish reading comprehension and vocabulary measures, but the differences were not statistically significant, and there were no

differences on the reading attitudes subtests. For the eighth-grade groups, the SSR students did significantly better on the vocabulary and the reading speed test (effect sizes of .43 and .61 respectively), but not on reading comprehension or attitudes.

There were some reported problems with treatment fidelity in this study. Only five of the eleven teachers were found to be conscientious in carrying out the SSR program. A separate analysis of those teachers who were faithful to the program revealed that their students did significantly better than the other experimental group bilinguals on both Spanish vocabulary and reading speed by a substantial margin (effect sizes of .88 and 1.37, respectively). There was no reported interaction between those who were enrolled in the SNS course and the treatment.

Clearly the program was effective for some students, particularly when the teachers made a serious effort to implement the treatment. Unfortunately, Schon et al. do not report on the breakdown of immigrant-Mexican versus Mexican American students in their sample, which may have affected its results (see below). The failure to find any interaction among the treatment and SNS course enrollment is also an ambiguous finding, since we do not know if the SNS students were more likely to be recently arrived immigrants.

Schon, Hopkins and Vojir (1984) report on two studies of SSR used in high school (grades nine to twelve) remedial reading courses. In the first study (Tempe), teachers in the experimental groups were given Spanish books for their bilingual students to use during the approximately 12 minutes a day of their SSR time over a period of four months. With the help of a bilingual resource aide, the instructors were asked to encourage their interested students to read in Spanish during SSR. The control group students received no Spanish language texts. Eighty percent of both the experimental and control group students came from a low-income area of the city, but the school itself served students from a predominantly Anglo, high-income area. Pre- and post-treatment measures were administered for Spanish reading comprehension and attitudes toward reading. Schon et al. found no significant differences between the two groups on either measure.

There are plausible reasons why the SSR treatment failed to produce better gains in the study. First, Krashen (1993) has noted that SSR programs provide consistently superior results to traditional instruction when given at least seven months (almost a full school year) to operate. The Tempe study last only four months. Second, experimental group students could choose either English or Spanish for their SSR reading.

If their dominant language for reading was English, then many may have simply chosen not to read in Spanish at all. Third, it is clear from the comments of the experimental group teachers that the HL students found the Spanish books and materials provided them either too difficult or uninteresting. Several students told their teacher that "I can't read Spanish. How do you expect me to read these materials?" (p. 38). Finally, many of the high school bilinguals may not have been motivated to read in the HL for reasons related to ethnic identity conflicts (see below).

In Schon's second high school study (Chandler, Arizona), teachers used a similar SSR approach. Again, a majority of the Spanish bilinguals are reported to have been from a low socio-economic part of the school district, but the school consisted primarily of middle-income Anglo students. The SSR students were provided with materials similar to those of the Tempe study discussed above, but here the SSR treatment lasted seven months instead of four. Schon and her colleagues reported no significant differences between the two groups on either the reading comprehension or the reading attitudes survey.

There are again some possible reasons why the SSR approach failed to produce positive results. The researchers point out that some of the teachers involved in the SSR treatment were not actually implementing it in their classrooms, thus making the comparisons between methods suspect. Further, the researchers reported that a number of students in the control group found out about the Spanish materials given to the experimental group and (voluntarily) began reading the experimental group's books and newspapers. The results of this study need, then, to be treated with caution.

What is interesting about both the Tempe and the Chandler studies, however, are the dramatic differences in how the U.S.-born Mexican American students and the more recently arrived, Mexican-born immigrants reacted to the Spanish reading materials made available to them. Schon and her colleagues reported that:

> [The] U.S.-born Hispanic students were not interested in reading in Spanish and rarely if ever used the specially provided reading materials in Spanish ... The responses of the Hispanics born in Mexico was quite different, however. They often read the Spanish materials provided and eagerly awaited the weekly *El Sol* newspaper.
>
> The responses of the U.S.-born Hispanics tended to be apathetic and passively hostile. In fact, many of the *CTBS Espanol* post-test scores in [the Chandler study] are obviously invalid due to lack of cooperation. (For example, scores went from about 50% on the pre-test to near 0% on the post-test). (Schon et al., 1984, pp. 36–37)

One teacher stated that "Mexican-American students are *embarrassed* about these books in Spanish. They don't want to look at them—they stay far away from them," while the "minority who come from Mexico are interested in them" (p. 38, emphasis added). Other teachers reported similar reactions among the experimental group students.

This lack of interest in HL materials is consistent with Tse's (this volume) four stage developmental model of ethnic identity formation. Tse found evidence among visible ethnic minorities that those who desire to join the majority group often go through predictable stages in coping with their ethnic identity, and that this process has important implications for their attitudes toward the HL. In stage 2 of Tse' s model, Ethnic Ambivalence/Evasion, ethnic minorities strive to identify themselves with the majority culture and as a consequence become ambivalent or even hostile toward associations with their HL. Tse notes that Stage 2 often takes place sometime during childhood and adolescence, which appears to be the case for the Mexican American students in Schon et al.'s studies.

Tse's model also predicts that this type of distancing from the HL will not affect those who still have strong ties to the heritage culture or who, for reasons of language or other social barriers, do not see integration into the majority group as possible. This again is precisely what Schon et al. report: the recently arrived Mexican-born immigrants, who are less likely to be able to integrate in the majority group of the school due to linguistic barriers, are not averse to reading materials in their HL.[2] This confirmation of Tse's predictions concerning ethnic minority students' reactions to efforts to promote the HL has potentially important implications for the implementation of HL programs, as I will discuss below.

University Level Studies

There have been three studies conducted using self-selected and free reading programs with university HL students. Rodrigo (1995; reported in McQuillan and Rodrigo, in press), used a literature-based program in a 15 week, intermediate (fourth semester) Spanish course in a large, private university in the Los Angeles area. The course consisted mostly of English-only students, but included six native Spanish bilinguals, most of whom were English dominant. Only the results from the HL students will be discussed here. The class met twice a week for 80 minutes, during which time students could read self-selected texts quietly and discuss their readings with the instructor. There were two elements of the program:

(1) *Popular Literature:* This involved the use of assigned, easy to read popular literature books which are interesting and comprehensible to students (Dupuy, Tse and Cook, 1996). Students read six "graded" books written especially for non-native speakers and two abridged books for the course. The graded readers were all of a single genre—detective stories—in accordance with the recommendations of Krashen (1981) regarding "narrow reading," where students take advantage of cumulative background knowledge derived from reading several texts on a similar topic. The readings were discussed in class, and students did a short book report on each.

(2) *Self-Selected Reading:* Students read three books of their own choosing, having only to keep a log of the books they read. Students also did brief oral reports in class in the form of "reviews" to let others in the class know what they were reading. Texts included graded readers, children's books, adolescent fiction, comic books, newspapers, magazines, and a few literary works.

To evaluate the success of the program, Rodrigo created a vocabulary checklist similar to the type used by West and Stanovich (1991) to measure the amount of incidental vocabulary acquisition (Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985). The vocabulary list was created from several graded readers in Spanish, some of which were read by Rodrigo's students as part of their self-selected reading. The six bilingual students made an average gain of 6% on the test in the 15 week period, an impressive gain considering that no formal evaluation on the self-selected reading or vocabulary instruction was used during the course. The results are consistent with other data which suggest that vocabulary acquisition is largely incidental and is most efficiently achieved through reading, particularly pleasure reading, rather than through direct instruction (Krashen, 1993).

Rodrigo also administered an open-ended affective survey. Five of the six HL students said they enjoyed reading in Spanish more after taking the course, and all six felt that their competence in Spanish reading had improved over the 15 week semester. Some comments from open-ended questions on the survey included:

—I liked the fact that there was no testing ... I actually felt the results of my improved reading comprehension as [the program] was going on.

—The material was interesting in that it helped me gain a better handle on Spanish.

—By reading subjects that interested me, I grew to understand more about Latin American views and learn Spanish writing techniques I was not familiar with (Rodrigo, 1995).

I conducted two studies in Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) courses using similar literature-based approaches (McQuillan, 1996). In the first study, the experimental class consisted of twenty mostly English-dominant bilingual students enrolled in a lower-division SNS course at a medium-sized public university in the Los Angeles area. The class met twice a week for three-hour sessions during the ten-week quarter. Students were placed in the course based on a mandatory placement exam administered by the university's foreign language department. The curriculum had two elements:

(1) *Survey of Popular Literature:* This was a type of extensive reading where students were given twenty readings representing a variety of genres of popular and classical Spanish literature in order to familiarize them with what was available for them to read for pleasure (Dupuy, Tse and Cook, 1996). The readings were discussed in class each week.

(2) *Literature Circles:* Students formed self-selected discussion groups at the beginning of the quarter and spent 20 minutes during each class period talking about a novel the group selected to read (MacGillivray, Tse and McQuillan, 1995; McQuillan and Tse, 1997).

The control group consisted of 19 students enrolled in another SNS class at the same university. Students received more traditional grammar work, but also read selections of literature during the course, minimizing somewhat the contrast with the experimental group.

As in Rodrigo (1995), incidental vocabulary growth was measured by a vocabulary checklist developed by Rodrigo (1994). The results indicated that the experimental group made significant gains in word knowledge during the quarter, averaging 8%. As in the case of Rodrigo's study above, this represents a substantial growth in vocabulary when we consider the short exposure to reading and the lack of any direct vocabulary instruction. The control group did not take the vocabulary test, however, so the gains cannot be compared to the more traditional approach.

Both groups were administered a survey on attitudes toward HL reading at the end of the course. The responses of the experimental group were slightly more positive with respect to the attitudes toward reading in the heritage language than the control group, although the dif-

ferences were not statistically significant. It is important to remember that the control group in this study also did some reading, which may account for their increased confidence toward reading in the HL. In any case, the experimental treatment produced comparable results with respect to attitudes toward the HL as the grammar-based method.

In the second study, a slightly different approach was used with a similar class of university-level, largely English-dominant SNS students (n = 10). The course met for 10 weeks, six hours per week, and had three components:

(1) *Popular Literature Survey:* The same method as described in Study 1 above was used.

(2) *Outside Self-Selected Reading:* Students kept a log of their outside reading from newspapers, magazines, and books. Students selected their own reading, and were encouraged to read the equivalent of about 10 newspaper articles a week. During class, students were asked to comment on what they were reading and recommend readings to their classmates.

(3) *Individual Inquiry Learning Project:* Students selected one topic related to Latino/Chicano culture that interested them and then read materials in Spanish related to that topic. The purpose of the Inquiry Project was to encourage students to take advantage of "narrow reading" (Krashen, 1981). A short, written report on the topic was turned in at the end of the quarter.

The course also included short lectures on Mexican and Mexican American history to provide further background knowledge for some students' self-selected reading. Some very limited grammar instruction was also included, comprising less than 10% of class time.

None of the students reported regular pleasure reading in their heritage language before the course began. In order to measure the long-term effects of the experimental treatment, an anonymous survey was sent to the students seven months after the end of the quarter to see if they were still reading for pleasure. In order to provide for a comparison with similar students, a group of eighteen SNS students who had not participated in the literature-based treatment were also surveyed. As shown in Table 3, significantly more students in the experimental group reported that they were reading in Spanish after the end of the course than the comparison group of university Spanish bilinguals (Fisher Exact Test, Two Tail, $p < .05$).

Table 3
Do You Read for Pleasure in Spanish?

Group	yes	no
Experimental	90% (9)	10% (1)
Control	44% (8)	56% (10)

(from McQuillan, 1996, Table 4)

In addition, sixty percent of the experimental group reported that they were reading more now than before they took the experimental course.

The number of subjects in this study was small, and the results can only be suggestive. However, they are consistent with previous research showing that even a short exposure to self-selected and free reading approaches can have long-term effects on reading habits (Greaney and Clarke, 1973).

Implications: Access and Timing in HL Programs

Unlike other recommendations for HL programs, particularly those which argue for a more grammatically-based syllabus (e.g. Sole, 1994), the use of self-selected and free voluntary reading has empirical support as to its effectiveness with HL students. These results are consistent with a large body of research on the effects of free voluntary reading on literacy development in first and second language classrooms (Krashen, 1993).

The research reviewed here also gives us some preliminary evidence on when HL programs might be most effective. Tse's four stage model of ethnic identity development predicts that HL programs will only be effective if ethnic minority students are willing to associate themselves with their heritage culture, or at least not be ambivalent or hostile to it. This typically occurs when (a) they are largely unaware of ethnic differences, usually in early childhood (Tse's Stage 1); or (b) when they are in "ethnic emergence" and "incorporation," during which time they often attempt to learn more about their ethnic culture, usually in late adolescence or adulthood (Stages 3 and 4). Students in Stage 2 of Tse's model, ethnic ambivalence/evasion, will not respond favorably to attempts to promote the HL.

This is essentially the pattern we see in studies reviewed here on HL students: HL programs in the early elementary grades and university level were successful, while programs aimed at junior and senior high school students produced few positive results.[3] Of course, there were problems with the high school studies discussed here (treatment fidelity, program duration, text difficulty and interest), so these conclusions are necessarily tentative. If true, however, they would indicate that HL programs will be most effective if they are aimed at ethnic minority students in late adolescence or early adulthood, and promote group membership with the heritage culture (Tse, this volume).[4]

A practical problem in implementing free reading programs for HL students is providing students with materials to read that are both interesting and comprehensible. Dupuy and McQuillan (1997a, 1997b) have proposed that intermediate and advanced HL students can make their own reading material—"handcrafted books"—which can be read by students in lower or similar level classes. These student-generated books have the advantage of giving adult acquirers sophisticated content at a low linguistic level. The long-term solution, however, is that schools and universities provide a rich source of HL reading materials in the library, where they are easily accessible.

Notes

1. I thank Stephen Krashen for this classification of reading options.

2. Becker (1990) reports on a similar phenomenon among immigrant high school students from Portugal living in urban New England. The immigrant teens who had resided longer in the United States (six to sixteen years) distanced themselves from the more recent arrivals (less than two years of residence) to the point where earlier arrivals would only speak English, identify themselves as Anglos, and refuse to acknowledge that they could speak or understand any Portuguese. (All of the students spoke Portuguese at home, however, and still had high levels of proficiency.)

3. We do not know, however, the composition of the early elementary classes (Schon, Hopkins and Davis, 1982) in terms of language dominance or length of residence. It is conceivable that the majority of students who participated in the program were recently arrived, Spanish dominant immigrants who were therefore "outside" the Tse model, since they may not have (yet) aspired to become members of the majority group.

4. We may speculate that the Spanish language ability of the teachers had some impact on promoting group membership and hence success of the HL programs in these studies. In the clearly successful early elementary and university level studies (Schon, Hopkins and Davis, 1982; Rodrigo, 1995; McQuillan, 1996), 100% (7/7) of the SSR group teachers were bilingual (five Latinos and two Anglos). In the studies where the HL program produced mixed or poor results (Schon, Hopkins and Vojir, 1984), only 18% (3/11) of the SSR teachers spoke Spanish (all Latinos), the rest being monolingual Anglos.

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