READING, WHOLE LANGUAGE AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

ABSTRACT: The place of reading in second language learning (SLL), as well as the whole language approach associated with it, is now generally accepted. This article focuses on the place of reading in a second language program, but approaches it through an autobiographical route, showing how the author’s actions, either as a student of a second language, or as a teacher of a second language, have found support in current approaches to reading as one means of SLL.

KEYWORDS: whole language, narrow reading, schema, libraries, phonics, second language attainment levels

When I was asked to write an article for this journal on reading, underpinned by a whole language approach to it, my first reaction was that having retired some years ago I had nothing more to say about reading, apart from what I had written during my years as a university academic. But the editors persuaded me otherwise.

In this article, I will follow an unusual approach (for me) of relating biographical elements to a theory of second language reading as a means of second language development. I need, however, to do two things first: talk briefly about whole language approach, because well before I understood this term I was practising this approach, and secondly to give you a brief description of the context in which I grew up and was educated.

The whole language approach to reading was a reaction to a more phonics-based approach to teaching early reading. The early proponents of the whole language approach (e.g., Goodman 1967 and Smith 1967) did, in their early writing, frame the argument in such a way as to imply there was no need to provide students with formal lessons on the relationship between sound and words. Perhaps a more extreme case was put by them in order to counterbalance the prevailing methods of teaching.
reading. The whole approach emphasized meaning to be more central, and thus advocated reading (including in the early stages, what we would call “Look and say”) as a means of learning how to read. When the whole language approach became the principal way to approach reading in many schools, particularly in USA, it was found that there were some students who could not read and who had no conception of the relationship of grapheme to sound. There occurred in USA (and in Australia) “reading wars” where people aligned themselves exclusively to either the whole language approach or to phonics as a way to teach reading. This was unfortunate because it created more heat than light.

In 1990 Adams published a book in which she evaluated the research on approaches to reading, and found that those who were good at reading were also good at phonics. But she also saw that reading was a complex activity, just as Clay (1979) had argued. She said that:

> there is much more to skillful word recognition than the memorization of the alphabet and its letter-to-sound correspondences. Similarly, the issues surrounding the proper development of comprehension are complex and extend vastly beyond the ways in which one might come to identify whole words.


It is true that good readers are good at phonics and it is also true that many readers do learn the sound-spelling relationship if they learn to read through a whole language approach. It is nevertheless the case that there are a number of students who do not see this relationship and who therefore do not crack the code for the purposes of reading. They need explicit instruction on the relationship between sound and letter (I suspect this is less of a problem with a language like Hindi where each letter represents a unique sound and this does not vary according to the context in which it occurs, as English does).

Much of current classroom teaching in Australia, for example, does now combine the whole language approach with a phonics approach so that students are operating at both a micro-level (phoneme-grapheme level) as well as at macro-level (words, phrases and clauses). Many years ago a reading researcher (John Downing) wrote about various paradoxes in
reading. One of them was that all good readers knew their alphabet well but teaching only the alphabet in the classroom did not turn students into good readers.

It is time now to turn to a brief personal background as a means of framing the rest of the article.

I was born in the Fiji Islands of Gujarati parents who ran a tailoring shop in the capital city, Suva. My first language was therefore Gujarati. Our house did not have many Gujarati books except for a few religious texts. Reading, and especially reading for pleasure, was not modelled in my family, or in the families with which we mixed. At six I went to a primary school, where the medium of instruction was Hindi. I thus learned to read first in Hindi. However, the school was far away (5 km seemed far in those days) and towards the end of my second year I was enrolled into a nearby Catholic primary school run by the Marist Brothers. The medium of instruction was English now and the reading materials were in English. After a month, I remember, I was ready to leave school and become a tailor, because the use of English as a medium of instruction meant that many lessons were for me simply a buzz of words and cognitive confusion. There was an added reason: the maths (it was called Arithmetic) teaching was carried out in a rather draconian manner and the continual strapping for not spitting out the answers fast enough was sufficient for me to consider tailoring a better option than education. However, my father insisted that I continue and he arranged for some after-school tuition for me.

When I was in Grade 4, I heard through my neighbourhood friends that an establishment called British Council had opened a library and we could borrow books from them without having to make any payment. So a whole group of us in the neighbourhood enrolled in the library and began to take out books. For most of my friends the novelty of borrowing books and taking them home (frequently not read) wore off and they stopped going to the library, except very occasionally. However, I was hooked on reading. I discovered, for example, the fairy tales, rather pedestrianly entitled *Green Book of Fairy Tales, Red Book of Fairy Tales* and so forth.¹ And I devoured them one after another. The tales were in a sense

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¹One memory from that time is the delight I took in the smell of books, which might be denied to those growing up with their reading on iPad or Kindle.
similar, at least in structure, and in many of the words used in them and hence I found I could understand most of the stories. I seldom used the dictionary – being too impatient to get on with the story – so would simply guess the meaning or not worry about the meaning of a word if I was getting the gist of the story. My reading patterns during the primary school continued largely along the lines that once I discovered and liked an author I would read through all his or her books – so I went through all of Enid Blyton’s books, then read all of the Biggles books and so on. Years later Krashen (2004) would advocate narrow reading (he has similar arguments for narrow listening – Krashen 1996). His basic argument for this type of reading is summarized in Krashen (2004):

- A writer’s phraseology and choice of words tends to get repeated in their books, so the reader is exposed to same or similar structures and vocabulary over many occasions, thus acquiring them (in the sense of Krashen (1982)).

- If the writer’s topic is similar, e.g., the Biggles books mentioned above, then over time the context becomes quite familiar and this aids in understanding the text.

- It can potentially be motivating for the reader – it is reader interest that drives the reading. (The reader stops reading when familiarity of topics/writing produces a degree of boredom – a principle I see in evidence in my reading habits even now.)

Narrow reading does allow you to internalize the context. In other words, it allows you to develop a rich schema for a particular genre, war in the case of Biggles (admittedly somewhat biased), or an elementary workings of a court as in the case of Erle Stanley Gardner’s books on Perry Mason. Understanding of both written and oral materials is strongly linked to the organized knowledge – schema - in one’s head (see, for example, Carrell & Eisterhold 1983; Anderson & Pearson 1984; and Nassaji 2007 for a more recent treatment of the same topic). In addition, it has been argued that internalized structure of a particular text/genre also assists in understanding (Carrell 1987). Most fairy tales, for example, have as their structure:
• a hero or heroine who is set some task
• who on the way to the fulfillment of the task meets friends who can magically help and enemies who try to prevent the fulfillment of the task
• the task fulfilled
• the tale ends frequently in marriage (“and they lived happily ever after”!) and the hero/heroine is thought to have become wiser.

So, in summary, narrow reading allows one to increase one’s understanding of the reading topic through the development of an ever more sophisticated schema on the topic as well as a more sophisticated schema of the structure of a particular genre. The repetition of certain words and structures that is typical of a genre helps in the learning of those words and structures. Some evidence of vocabulary development from reading was found by Nagy, Herman & Anderson (1985). Elley (1987) showed that if children listened to the same story three times, there was considerable vocabulary gain from the experiences. And one can almost take it as axiomatic that a reader is not going to invest time in a particular story unless he or she is captured by it in some way.

To return to the biography again, it was not the case that I knew about narrow reading, and in any case, the idea was developed by Krashen much later than the era in which I attended elementary level classes. But such narrow reading allowed me to move from one genre to another and, as secondary education expanded my knowledge of English literature, to read books that came out of the English literary canon also. This expansion of horizons for me (and for a number of my classmates) was greatly assisted by an outstanding teacher of English (and literature) we had in the senior high school. The teacher, an Australian woman on a short teaching assignment in Fiji, was able to transfer her obvious love of literature and language to many of us in the class. It was a teacher such as her that Rabindranath Tagore, I am sure, had in his mind when he wrote this short poem:

2 It has to be acknowledged that vocabulary knowledge is not an “all or nothing” phenomenon; it is much more graded. One may know a meaning a little more generally, without having a knowledge of more refined features of it. For example, I may guess that “gobble” means “eat” but it may take a number of meetings with the word in different contexts before I internalize the fact that it means “eats fast” (with a hint of disapproval).
A teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself.
A lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to burn its own flame.
The teacher who has come to the end of his subject, who has no living traffic with his knowledge but merely repeats his lesson to his students can only lead their minds;
He cannot quicken them.

My reading journey, however, began not through a teacher, but through the opportunity to borrow books from a library nearby. Many years later, as members of the Suva Institute for Educational Research, we conducted a national reading survey at Grade 6 level and found that about one-quarter of the children in Fiji schools could not read at the levels required of them at Grade 6. An interesting co-relational result was found: those students with high achievement in reading came from schools which had large libraries and/or homes with many books (Elley & Mangubhai 1979). Those who have followed Krashen’s writings and his career will know that he is an ardent advocate of libraries in schools and communities. (He recently submitted an invited paper to the Obama-Biden Educational Policy Working Group in 2008.) Krashen believes that access to books through community and school libraries can contribute to Free Voluntary Reading (or leisure reading) and this, he has argued, provides comprehensible input which is necessary for second language acquisition.

The next significant biographical incident, in terms of wider reading, whole language and SLL, did not occur until after the completion of my bachelor degree in literature at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand and subsequently my teacher training at Christchurch Teachers College, also in New Zealand. (There was a brief interlude of four years – straight after completion of secondary education - when I worked for the Bank of Baroda as a bank officer, an experience I have cherished.) Upon return to the Fiji Islands from New Zealand, I was posted to a rural secondary boarding school (Grades 7 to 12) that had only Fijian students (boys only) and just one student of Indian background. The Head of the
English Department handed me the texts that were to be used in Grade 9 for the English subject. It was a book full of exercises driven by different grammatical points. After a week of using this textbook, I was convinced that my students were not going to learn the English language in this manner – doing exercises where one could virtually switch off one’s mind. I decided to develop my own lessons around comprehension passages which I chose from newspapers, magazines or books, including textbooks on the basis of what the students might find motivating.

It took me some years to think through the ideas about having comprehension-based instruction for second language teaching. It came to fruition in a textbook that my colleague McKeating and I wrote for use in Grade 11 in the South Pacific (McKeating & Mangubhai 1978; Mangubhai & McKeating 1984). The organizing principle for this textbook was to begin with a comprehension text that would be of interest to students at Grade 11. We chose texts which had themes that could be associated with their own lives (e.g., a passage on the use of traditional methods of healing led to a discussion and questions on types of traditional medicines used in their own communities). The ideas in a passage formed the basis of an oral element of a lesson where ideas were elicited from students and could be written down on the blackboard, and appropriate vocabulary and expressions introduced. Using the talk as a basis for preparation, students then wrote pieces on a related topic. Evaluation of such writing provided teachers with a knowledge of their students’ language errors which could then be the basis for grammar lessons.

The textbook had been organized largely (but not entirely) intuitively on the basis of the experience of teaching a second language by the two authors. By contrast, a more research-based collection of chapters was produced by Harris (1981) in which he (and other writers) argued for comprehension as a basis for language learning. And it was about the same time that Krashen (1982, 1985) was arguing for comprehensible input as a necessary condition for second language acquisition.

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3 If the technologies widely used now had been available then, it would have been relatively simple to have introduced spoken materials related to topics from the internet, so that the listening component of language learning would also have been emphasized.
Another feature of my classroom teaching was to encourage students to read for pleasure, borrowing books from a reasonably substantial library that the school had. There were only a few successes because I was dealing with a culture in which reading for pleasure was not a normal activity (for the cultural basis of reading see, for example, Street 1993; Mangubhai 1995a, 1995b). Granted that reading for pleasure might not be a practice common in the cultural milieu I was operating in, could reading occur in the context or culture of the school? This was only an incipient idea in my mind towards the end of 1970s. In 1980 Professor Elley and I set up a research project which we called the “Fiji Book Flood,” an idea that Elley had toyed with in New Zealand. This year-long project (eventually becoming two years) randomly identified schools with Grades 4 and 5 in rural areas where English was used only in the school context while the home contexts used Fijian or Hindustani. What the school was required to do was to allow students to read for about 30 minutes each day, and take those 30 minutes off their normal English language lesson. The school also had to provide some shelving in the classroom so that the books that we, as researchers, provided each of the two grades could be displayed in the classroom. We then provided them with about 250 books for each grade, over a period of many months, so that there was always a fresh supply of new titles every month or so. We asked the teachers to simply let the students read the books they themselves selected. This was initially quite difficult for some teachers, who wanted to ask questions to find out whether the students understood what they were reading – our position was that with a sufficient number of different story books available students would choose to read what they could understand. Their choices would be guided by what interested them and they would read the stories for pleasure, without having the teacher quiz them about their understanding of them. There were an equal number of schools and classes that were matched as control classes and these classes continued with their normal language program, which was largely grammar based. So the only difference between the experimental and control groups was that the former spent about 30 minutes a day reading story books.
At the end of the first year when tests were carried out, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on reading and listening comprehension tests, and English Structures test at Grade 5, and in comprehension, English structures and word recognition tests at Grade 4. There were no differences in writing achievement between the experimental and control groups. The experiment was continued for another year with the same students, now moving up a grade. The previous gains continued into the second year but additionally it was found that the experimental group was writing significantly better than the control group. Details of this experiment are to be found in Elley & Mangubhai (1981 and 1983).

The experiment showed that regular reading in the classroom context helped these students to develop their English language, without ‘tears,’ one might say. Students read what interested them and disregarded those books that did not interest them – the books of little interest were usually in a fairly pristine condition whereas the popular books showed wear and tear. The results of this experiment fit in quite well with the ideas advocated by Krashen (1981, 1991) that comprehensible input is necessary to develop a second language. The results also reflect the great emphasis that Krashen (2004) has put on Free Voluntary Reading.

As readers are aware, while most second language researchers acknowledge that comprehensible input is a necessary condition, they generally do not consider it a sufficient condition (e.g., Swain 1985; Swain & Lapkin 1995; Ellis 2002). Swain (1985) has advocated that learners, in order to learn the SL, have to produce comprehensible output and that they need to be “pushed” to do that. Another line of research has argued that second language learners also need to focus on form in order to learn the grammar of the language (Long & Robinson, 1998; Ellis 2001, 2002). Lightbown, Halter, White & Horst (2002) argued on the basis of research carried out by them that students needed pedagogical guidance in order to develop their writing skills. In other words, simply reading may not develop their writing skills.

It would therefore seem that there are a number of other factors that need to be considered in trying to interpret the results that Elley & Mangubhai (1983) achieved. To take the Lightbown et al. and Swain
ideas first, primary schools in Fiji had as an integral part of the curriculum lessons on composition which frequently began with writing sentences and paragraphs to writing longer compositions, generally a narrative rather than expository piece of writing. Students involved in the Fiji Book Flood were therefore getting practice in writing, if not some pedagogical guidance in the development of this skill. The students were also, in a sense, pushed to produce language, admittedly largely written.

With regard to focus on form, Mangubhai (1991) in his study of students learning Hindi as a Second Language found that some of the students focused on the grammar of the Hindi language once the message was clear to them. In other words, when students could understand the Hindi utterances easily, they had sufficient short-term memory resources (see, for example, VanPatten 1996, 2003 about resource allocation) to focus on untangling the grammar of the language. Using this insight, Mangubhai (2001) argued that the children in the Fiji Book Flood Project had sufficient memory resources to focus on form because many of the stories: (i) were simple and well-illustrated, thus making meaning more accessible; (ii) had incremental language which resulted in much repetition, once again facilitating meaning; and (iii) recycled stories through different editions from different publishers, thus making the stories both familiar and ‘new.’ In addition, these children continued to receive language-focused instruction in their English lessons so that they were more predisposed to look at the language patterns in their reading once the meaning was easily accessible.

The Fiji Book Flood Project is interesting in many respects. While the Project itself focused on reading books for pleasure, this occurred within the context of the school and alongside an ESL/EFL\(^4\) curriculum, which provided instruction in grammar, some intensive reading and English language composition. However, the results also show that the students involved in reading picked up the grammar of the language better than those students who had a diet of grammar teaching but not free voluntary reading. Well-written books provide good examples of language to readers/

\(^4\) In the Fijian context, the capital city and bigger towns could be thought of as ESL contexts. A large number of children, however, were being educated in rural areas in an EFL type of context.
learners and this, in contexts where teachers’ ability in ESL/EFL can be quite variable, can be seen as countermanding the poor samples of language that might be provided by an ill-trained teacher.

The title indicated that this article was going to be a personal journey. Lessons from personal behaviour and experience of teaching indicate that the best form of second language learning occurs when (a) it is underpinned by meaningful language, (b) it takes place in a motivating context, (c) it is self-driven, and (d) it is pleasurable. Extensive reading seems to provide all the four ingredients!

REFERENCES


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