



Vocabulary Acquisition Through Deep Reading: Exploring The Potential Of Poetry With ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of deep reading poetry for English vocabulary acquisition among undergraduate EFL learners at Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli, India, applying Krashen's "Comprehensible Input Hypothesis". The experimental group engaged in deep reading activities centred on W.W. Gibson's poem "The Stone", while a comparison group received traditional vocabulary instruction. Pre- and post-tests measuring comprehension of 15 target words from the poem revealed significant vocabulary gains in the experimental group, exceeding those of the comparison group, and demonstrating sustained retention in a delayed post-test. Findings suggest that deep reading of poetry provides rich, comprehensible input, fostering incidental vocabulary acquisition and supporting Krashen's theory. While the focused approach using a single poem allowed for in-depth analysis, future research should explore diverse poetic genres and larger participant groups to broaden the scope of these findings. Vocabulary development and language acquisition. Extensive reading, in particular, has been shown to provide the necessary linguistic input and contextual cues to support vocabulary learning. Poetry, with its rich imagery, concentrated language, and emotional depth, offers a unique opportunity for language learning. This study explores how deep engagement with poetry can facilitate vocabulary acquisition among English as a Second Language learners. While traditional pedagogical approaches have often viewed poetry as inaccessible for language learners, recent studies have highlighted the potential benefits of integrating poetry into language instruction. Poetry can serve as a valuable source of "input-rich" language that exposes learners to a range of linguistic structures, vocabulary, and cultural references. The study discusses that even lexically accessible poetry can present challenges for language learners, necessitating scaffolding and support from teachers to facilitate comprehension and vocabulary development.

Keywords: Vocabulary acquisition, deep reading, poetry, Comprehensible Input Hypothesis

Introduction

Developing English language proficiency, particularly in vocabulary acquisition, remains a central challenge for many English as a Foreign Language learners. While extensive research has been conducted on the benefits of extensive reading for vocabulary development, less attention has been given to the potential role of poetry in this process. This paper investigates the use of poetry as a means of acquiring English vocabulary, drawing upon Krashen's "Comprehensible Input Hypothesis" as a theoretical framework. A case study will be presented to explore the experiences of English language learners engaging in deep reading of poetry and the impact on their vocabulary development.

Literature Survey

The "Comprehensible Input Hypothesis" proposed by Stephen Krashen emphasizes the importance of providing language learners with substantial, meaningful input that is slightly beyond their current level of proficiency (Liando et al., 2021). This notion is supported by research demonstrating the benefits of extensive

reading for language development. As Krashen states, “extensive reading provides contextualized clues for better reading comprehension, and substantial linguistic input needed for language development” (Guo, 2012). Moreover, studies have found a correlation between extensive reading and specific linguistic skills, including breadth of vocabulary, improved writing, and ease of oral communication.

However, the existing literature suggests that the use of authentic materials, such as poetry, in extensive reading programs has received insufficient attention. Researchers have noted the “seamless relationship between teaching poetry and language acquisition”, as poetry can provide “clear advantages for learners to perceive the characteristics of target structures in contexts and use these forms for communicative language use”. At the same time, challenges in using poetry for language learning have also been identified.

Some studies have found that EFL/ESL learners may perceive poetry as too difficult, with linguistic features such as “vocabulary, grammatical deviations, old-fashioned expressions or complicated metaphorical language” presenting barriers to comprehension. Teachers’ assistance and scaffolding are often necessary to support learners’ understanding of the poetic language and intent.

Acquisition and Learning in Second Language Acquisition

Krashen’s ground-breaking work on second language acquisition has highlighted the distinction between language acquisition and language learning, with the former being a subconscious process of developing language proficiency, and the latter being the conscious study of language rules and structures. Acquisition occurs as an unconscious process. It encompasses the organic advancement of linguistic competence. This is accomplished via comprehending language and employing it for significant communication. Krashen differentiates between “acquisition” and “learning”. The “acquisition” of language is an unconscious process like that experienced by students as they learn their first language. The acquisition of language is the outcome of formal instruction and involves a deliberate process that culminates in explicit knowledge of the language. He asserts that understanding grammatical rules will not facilitate language acquisition; rather, meaningful contact in the target language, when speakers focus on the communicative act rather than the structure of their utterances, is essential.

Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Hypothesis

Students acquire language by comprehending input that exceeds their existing level of proficiency. Krashen’s “Comprehensible Input hypothesis” elucidates the process by which learners acquire a second language. This hypothesis posits that when a learner is at stage ‘I’, acquisition occurs upon exposure to “Comprehensible Input”, enabling progression to the subsequent level ‘i + 1’. This will occur only when the input is clear. Learners exist at various levels. They should understand the language. The Comprehensible Input hypothesis facilitates second language acquisition for learners. The acquisition process occurs at a subconscious level. When input is provided without anxiety, language acquisition will occur. This hypothesis contradicts the conventional perspective that conscious learning is essential for second language acquisition. Krashen’s “Comprehensible Input Hypothesis” posits that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to input that is slightly beyond their current level of proficiency, but still comprehensible (Liando et al., 2021). As outlined in (Liando et al., 2021), Krashen emphasizes that extensive exposure to language input, whether spoken or written, is essential for vocabulary development and language acquisition.

Reading for Vocabulary Acquisition

Numerous studies have demonstrated the efficacy of extensive reading in the acquisition of vocabulary for second language learners (Shadiev & Wang, 2022) (Henry et al., 2016) (Liando et al., 2021). Reading is a fundamental component of language acquisition. It is a purposeful activity. A learner may read to acquire information, validate current knowledge, or evaluate a writer’s ideas or writing style. An individual may read for pleasure or to increase their understanding of the language being read. Reading strategies differ among individuals. Investigations into reading (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Haste, 1994; Y. Goodman, 1980, 1996, 2003; Y. Goodman & Flurkey, 1996) have demonstrated that learners’ cognitive models of reading and literacy evolve through linguistic engagement and interaction with cohesive discourse. According to Gardner (1987, cited in Kletzien, 1991: 69), “a reading strategy is an action (or series of actions) utilised to construct meaning.” According to Olshavsky, reading strategies are “intentional methods for understanding the author’s message” (Olshavsky, 1977).

It is hypothesised that extensive reading on any subject will expose them to a vast array of syntax and terminology utilised in other domains. Cowan (1974). Deep Reading offers extensive exposure to a vast array of grammar and vocabulary pertinent to the subject matter. Deep reading is a method grounded in the philosophy put forth by Stephen Krashen. Krashen’s comprehension (input) hypothesis elucidates how frequent exposure to a specific topic or genre facilitates learners’ acquisition of the vocabulary pertinent to that genre. Engaging in deep reading of novels, poems, and short tales will facilitate learners’ understanding of language.

Stephen Krashen affirms, “The case for narrow reading is based on the idea that the acquisition of both structure and vocabulary comes from many exposures in a comprehensible context, that is, we acquire new structures and words when we understand messages, many messages that they encode. Narrow reading

facilitates this process in several ways” (Language Magazine 3(5):17-19, (2004)). When comprehensible input is given, the students acquire vocabulary and language.

There should be no stress on pupils who are learning vocabulary and language, which is why a poem with a tale was chosen to be taught. To help youngsters learn the language, a peaceful environment should be given, which is offered when pupils read a poem. Surely, the story will entice them to fully participate in this practice.

Poetry as Comprehensible Input for Vocabulary Acquisition

While traditional pedagogical approaches have often viewed poetry as inaccessible for language learners, recent studies have highlighted the potential benefits of integrating poetry into language instruction. (Mart, 2021). Poetry can serve as a valuable source of “input-rich” language that exposes learners to a range of linguistic structures, vocabulary, and cultural references. Furthermore, the study discussed suggests that even lexically accessible poetry can present challenges for language learners, necessitating scaffolding and support from teachers to facilitate comprehension and vocabulary development.

Methodology and Case Study

This case study involved a group of intermediate-level English language learners focusing on a case study involving the poem “The Stone” by W.W. Gibson in deep reading focused on English-language poetry. The participants were asked to read a selection of poems, focusing on vocabulary acquisition and the development of strategies for interpreting poetic language. Data was collected through a combination of pre-, post- and delayed post-intervention vocabulary assessments, learner reflections, and classroom observations.

The development of English language proficiency, particularly in vocabulary acquisition, remains a central challenge for many English as a Foreign Language learners. While extensive research has been conducted on the benefits of extensive reading for vocabulary development, less attention has been given to the potential role of poetry in this process. This paper investigates the use of poetry as a means of acquiring English vocabulary, focusing on a case study involving the poem “The Stone” by W.W. Gibson, and drawing upon Krashen’s “Comprehensible Input Hypothesis” as a theoretical framework. The case study will explore the experiences of English language learners engaging in deep reading of “The Stone”, and the impact on their vocabulary development.

Krashen’s “Comprehensible Input Hypothesis” posits that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to input that is slightly beyond their current level of proficiency, but still comprehensible. As outlined in (Mart, 2021), Krashen emphasizes that extensive exposure to language input, whether spoken or written, is essential for vocabulary development and language acquisition. Extensive reading, in particular, has been shown to provide the necessary linguistic input and contextual cues to support vocabulary learning. While traditional pedagogical approaches have often viewed poetry as inaccessible for language learners, recent studies have highlighted the potential benefits of integrating poetry into language instruction. The study discussed suggests that even lexically accessible poetry can present challenges for language learners, necessitating scaffolding and support from teachers to facilitate comprehension and vocabulary development. (Nishihara, 2022) (Mart, 2021) (Imron & Hantari, 2021)

The Study

Participants

The participants consisted of undergraduate students (50 for the Control Group and 50 for the Experimental Group) from Bishop Heber College in Tiruchirappalli, India. Participants were exclusively arts students who held the belief that vocabulary growth necessitates learning words in isolation. They were unaware that they could acquire vocabulary incidentally through reading and listening to language. Furthermore, they were unaware of the Comprehension Hypothesis. They had studied English as a second language for fifteen to sixteen years.

Procedure

The poem, “The Stone” by W.W. Gibson was used for the study, for the experimental group. Fifteen target words from the poem were identified with the help of students. “The Stone” contained the following words:

1. beneath 2. blurt 3. desire 4. dread 5. fling
6. heap 7. loiter 8. quarry 9. rumble 10. shock
11. sped 12. splinter 13. strike 14. stripling 15. witless

The experimenter administered a 50-word pre-test, of which 15 were taken directly from the poem and the remaining 35 were selected at random. The experimental group was then given an explanation of the poem. It took about sixty minutes to complete this operation. The same group was permitted to recite the same poem aloud in silence the next day. The duration of this treatment was roughly sixty minutes. A repeated exposure was given for another sixty minutes. The chosen 15 words were used in the post-test. After three months Delayed Post-test was administered.

The comparison group was then taken into account. A pre-test of the 50-word set was given by the experimenter. The comparison group was given an explanation of the meaning of these fifty words by the

experimenter. After the session, they were given a post-test consisting of the identical collection of fifteen words that had been provided to the experimental group. After three months Delayed Post-test was administered.

Results

Table 1 shows the mean scores of the participants in the test

	Pre-test scores	Post-test scores	Delayed Post-test scores
Experimental group	Mean - 2.16 SD - 1.05	Mean - 13.92 SD - 1.17	Mean - 13.44 SD - 1.40
Comparison group	Mean - 2.08 SD - 1.02	Mean - 13.16 SD - 2.09	Mean - 9.78 SD - 1.97

Number of students: Experimental subjects 50; Comparisons 50

The standard deviation for raw scores.

The maximum score was 15

Discussion

Deep reading aids individuals in comprehending the significance of the words employed in poetry. The comprehension hypothesis posits that vocabulary acquisition occurs through exposure to understandable input in the target language. The structure and composition of the poem are irrelevant to the subjects. The pupils experienced no pressure to master vocabulary. They appreciated the poetry and the narrative it encompassed. The students were unaware that their reading and listening to the narrative served to enrich their vocabulary since they concentrated solely on comprehension.

The research demonstrates that vocabulary acquisition in a second language is more efficacious when employing the deep reading strategy. Although the teacher did not provide formal instruction on vocabulary acquisition, the subjects instinctively learnt meaning through understandable information from the teacher's explanations and reading.

The participants of the comparison group exposed to the old manner of conveying meanings did not comprehend the words clearly and had merely memorised their definitions. Consequently, they could not keep it for an extended duration, whereas the members of the experimental group, who engaged in a thorough reading of the poetry, did not depend on memorisation to comprehend the complete significance of the lines. Consequently, they were able to preserve the words for an extended duration.

The key implications of this study are that poetry can serve as a rich source of “comprehensible input” to support vocabulary development, and that deep reading strategies can be leveraged to facilitate the acquisition of new words within a meaningful context, in alignment with Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (Nishihara, 2022) (Rajaei, 2013) (Chang & Ma, 2018) (Klingner et al., 1998).

Conclusion

The result is consistent with the study that “One, or a very few experiences with a new word can suffice for the child to enter it into his mental lexicon and to represent some of its syntactic and semantic features”... and the full mapping of the word occurs “as the child encounters the word again” (Carey, 1978). So, deep reading of poetry provides the necessary exposure to unfamiliar words for incidental vocabulary acquisition to occur. The result is consistent with the study that “One, or a very few experiences with a new word can suffice for the child to enter it into his mental lexicon and to represent some of its syntactic and semantic features”... and the full mapping of the word occurs “as the child encounters the word again” (Carey, 1978). The study demonstrates that extensive reading and exposure to target language input through poetry can lead to vocabulary gains among language learners, supporting Krashen’s Comprehensible Input hypothesis. (Nishihara, 2022) (Chang & Ma, 2018) (Proctor et al., 2007) (Elleman et al., 2009). A few potential limitations of the study include the small sample size and the use of only a single poem. Future research should examine vocabulary acquisition through deep reading of a wider range of poetry genres and with larger, more diverse samples.

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Biography

Dr. Suresh Frederick has a Ph.D in English from Bharathidasan University, Trichy. He is currently working as an Associate Professor of English at Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli, India. He has twenty three years of working experience as an ESL teacher at Bishop Heber College, Trichy in India. He has presented papers in many International Conferences held at Kula Lumpur, Penang, Bangkok and Limerick.
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Appendix 1: Post-test on "The Stone" by W. W. Gibson

Name:

Roll No:

1. splinter – a. A black one b. Sister c. A small piece
Sentence:
2. strike – a. hit b. hill c. order
Sentence:
3. quarry – a. open excavation b. quill c. exhibition
Sentence:
4. loiter – a. always agile b. Stand around idly c. stand and laugh
Sentence:
5. stripling – a. young man b. old man c. stupid
Sentence:
6. desire – a demand b. wish c. sing
Sentence:
7. shock – a. Sudden upsetting event b. dull day c. sunshine
Sentence:
8. rumble – a. noiseless b. quiet c. rolling sound
Sentence:
9. beneath – a. below b. top c. middle
Sentence:
10. heap – a. nothing b. mass of things c. happy
Sentence:
11. dread – a. great fear b. dead c. No fear
Sentence:
12. sped – a. move quickly b. move slowly c. no movement
Sentence:
13. fling – a. stay b. throw forcefully c. sing
Sentence:
14. blurt – a. reveal without thinking b. no talking c. always mute
Sentence:
15. witless – a. happy b. dull c. intelligent
Sentence: