



Pleasure Reading

Stephen Krashen, Professor Emeritus,
University of Southern California



Stephen Krashen received a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of California, Los Angeles in 1972. Krashen has published more than 550 articles and books, contributing to the fields of [second-language acquisition](#), [bilingual education](#), and reading. He is renowned for introducing various hypotheses related to second-language acquisition, including the [acquisition-learning hypothesis](#), the input hypothesis, the [monitor hypothesis](#), the [affective filter](#), and the [natural order hypothesis](#). Krashen also promotes [free voluntary reading](#), which he says “is the most powerful tool we have in language education, first and second.”

I am convinced that the most powerful tool we have in Language Education is self-selected reading for pleasure, which means—for most people—a large amount of fiction. (Eighteen of the 20 “[best-sellers of all time](#)” are fiction.)

Self-selected pleasure reading helps NEARLY EVERYTHING we are concerned with in education, and has the following advantages.

- It is inexpensive and often even totally free of charge.
- It is easy to do, and can be done alone, without supervision,
- The devices used for self-selected reading for pleasure are portable (the book) and some devices require only the simplest technology (the book).
- And doing it gives amazing results.

Self-selected pleasure reading works because it is based on solid theory, the idea we acquire language when we understand it, NOT when we study grammar or memorize vocabulary. It’s just the opposite: grammar and vocabulary are the result of getting input, not the cause.

Here is what the research tells us:

- 1. Voluntary reading is a consistent predictor of performance on tests of vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and writing style** (e.g., Krashen, 1989; Mason and Krashen, 2017).
- 2. Surprisingly, pleasure reading, often largely fiction, will give you nearly all the ACADEMIC LANGUAGE you need to understand school subjects.** McQuillan’s analysis (McQuillan, 2019) of the vocabulary in 22 novels written for young people (e.g., the Nancy Drew and Twilight series) showed that they included 85% of the words included on the Academic Word List, words considered to be essential for academic success. Forty-four percent of the words appeared at the list 12 or more times, enough for acquisition.
- 3. Pleasure reading gives you KNOWLEDGE:** People who read more know more about several topics studied in school, such as history and science (West, Stanovich, and Mitchell, 1993). This appears to be true even if they are “narrow” readers, those who stay with a small set of topics of particular interest to them.

Miller (2009) gives an example that confirms that “narrow” reading of fiction results not only in impressive amounts vocabulary and of factual knowledge, but also accomplishes some of the goals of literature study.

“One year, Tommy, a staunch fantasy fan, read sixty-five fantasy and science-fiction books, but avoided almost every other genre or book ... He knew what he liked and he enjoyed the freedom to read whatever he wanted ... I left Tommy to read what he wanted. ... Talking with Tommy for two minutes revealed the depth of knowledge he acquired about fortresses, armaments, mythology, and medieval history from all those fantasy books. He also understood complex literacy ideas like tone, allegory, and character archetypes right away when I taught them, having already discovered multiple examples from his books” (p. 66).

HABITS OF MIND. Research shows that readers have greater empathy and understanding of others. They understand that the world is complex and are skeptical of simple solutions (Kidd and Castano, 2013; Djikic, Oatley, and Moldoveanu, 2013).

This makes sense: When we read fiction, we experience events and situations we would ordinarily not experience, and we learn “... to be somebody else, learning the see the world through their eyes.” (Gross, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/01/terry-gross-in-conversation.html>).

Barack Obama and Noam Chomsky have come to similar conclusions:

“When I think about how I understand my role as citizen, ... the most important stuff I’ve learned I think I’ve learned from novels. It has to do with empathy. It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of grays, but there’s still truth there to be found ... And ... it’s possible to connect with some[one] else even though they’re very different from you.”
—Barack Obama. [8 of President Obama’s Best Quotes About Reading](#)

“It is quite possible—overwhelmingly probable ... that we will always learn more about human life and personality from novels than from scientific psychology.” (Chomsky, 1988).

PLEASURE OF READING. In McQuillan (1996), 41 out of 49 (84%) of students enrolled in university level ESL classes and third semester Spanish classes felt that reading (self-selected combined with assigned) was more pleasurable than grammar instruction.

It’s not always true that what feels good is good for you, but this seems to be true for language acquisition.

This is a win-win-win-win situation: It’s pleasant, and it works for language, knowledge, developing empathy, and a healthy suspicion of simple solutions. In this case, however, the simple solution is correct.

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