IS LIGHT READING ENOUGH TO FULLY ACQUIRE ACADEMIC LANGUAGE? THE BRIDGE HYPOTHESIS

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Abstract

The Bridge Hypothesis states that pleasure reading acts as a bridge between conversational and academic language, providing the competence that makes demanding texts more comprehensible. In two studies, D. Gardner argues that pleasure reading does not play a role in helping children understand academic texts, but a close look at the data shows that Gardner's evidence actually supports the Bridge Hypothesis.

Keywords: Light reading, pleasure reading, academic language, vocabulary development.

RECENT ACCUSATION AGAINST THE READING HYPOTHESIS

In two studies, Gardner (2004, 2008) questions the claim that pleasure reading can play a role in developing academic language. In both cases, Gardner attacks a position I do not think anybody holds, the position that readers can get all the vocabulary they need from reading stories. This "strong light reading" position insists that light reading does the entire job of preparing children for academic reading, that every word they will encounter in school texts will have already been acquired from stories.

THE "LIGHT READING AS A BRIDGE" POSITION

My position has always been that light reading is a bridge to academic language, that doing lots of light reading will make academic reading more comprehensible.

In other words, a secondary school student who has read a lot of light fiction will be better prepared for a history of the world class than a student with a similar background who has not been a light reader. Light reading, in other words, is the missing link. This is supported by case histories as well

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as analyses showing that the vocabulary content of light reading falls about in the middle between conversation and academic prose (Krashen, 2004).

Gardner's results are consistent with this "light reading as bridge" position.

GARDNER (2004)

Gardner (2004) examined texts written for fifth graders, approximately one million words of narrative text and 400,000 words of expository text, and concluded that the vocabulary content of these two kinds of texts "are largely dissimilar" (p. 17). Thus, he concluded, reading stories will not prepare you for reading academic texts. Specifically, the narrative texts did not provide enough academic vocabulary (sometimes called "subtechnical" vocabulary), words such as "academic," "absorb," and "abandon."

Gardner reported that only seven percent of the academic words that appeared in the expository text also appeared in the narrative texts at least ten times, considered to be a reasonable threshold for acquisition.

This is, however, only a problem if we insist that light reading provide readers with everything they need in order to understand every word of academic texts that they will encounter that year! In other words, Gardner assumes that for narrative reading to be useful, it needs to provide readers with full acquisition of every word in the academic texts they are about to read.

This is not the claim of the "light reading as bridge" position, the position that light reading helps make academic reading more comprehensible. In other words, the question to ask is whether narrative reading contains enough "acquirable" words in it to help make academic texts in general more comprehensible, not necessarily those the children are expected to read right away.

The answer is yes. There were 338 acquirable academic words in the narrative texts in Gardner's sample. This is an impressive amount. It suggests that a year of reading stories (one million words) will result in the acquisition of 338 academic words. That's a real contribution, whether or not these words also appeared in the expository texts the children will read that year. (1)

There are other problems with Gardner's conclusion.

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ARE THE NARRATIVE TETXS CHOSEN WHAT CHILDREN ACTUALLY READ?

The texts Gardner used may not be representative of the texts young readers actually read. The fiction she analyzed consisted of winners of the Newbury Award winners. Adult critics value these books, but children are typically not enthusiastic about them (Ujiie & Krashen, 2006).

NOT NARROW READING

In addition, the books chosen were in "different fictional registers" (p. 10). Analyses of children's self-selected reading over time show that children typically do not select widely different books, but tend to read narrowly, and gradually expand their interests as they mature (Labrant, 1958). Gardner's second study, discussed below, addresses this issue, and provides even more evidence for the power of reading.

GARDNER (2008)

In a second study, Gardner (2008) analyzed the frequency of occurrence of "specialized" words, words that do not appear in the 1,000 most frequently appearing word families, in several kinds of texts.

His major claim is that narrative texts (stories) are less effective than expository texts in contributing to vocabulary acquisition, even when "narrow" reading is done. The crucial data is the number specialized words appearing at least six times in the first 5,000 words of the texts selected for analysis. Narrow narrative reading (in this case books by a single author on a single theme) did not produce as many acquirable words as narrow expository reading (single theme) did, although narrow reading was more efficient than ordinary reading.

Once again, the real question is whether narrative texts can help the comprehension of academic texts, whether they can serve as a bridge to academic reading. Gardner used three sets of narrow texts. If we eliminate proper names, the corpus of narrow reading Gardner analyzed contains a total of 119 acquirable words, that is, words appearing at least six times (see Appendix). Of these, only six appeared in more than one series. Thus, Gardner's corpus of 60,000 words (three sets, each with 20,000 words) contained 113 individual acquirable words. This extrapolates to about 1900 academic words per year (assuming one million words read), a strong contribution. If we limit the analysis to words appearing at least ten times, as in Gardner (2004), there are 47 acquirable words in the corpus of 60,000 words, which extrapolates to 783 words per year, about double the figure

estimated for academic words from the texts in Gardner (2004), confirming the advantage of narrow reading.

Children tend to engage in narrow reading, preferring series books (Ujiie & Krashen, 2006), which suggests that the 783 per year figure based on narrow reading is a more accurate estimate of vocabulary growth from narrative texts than is the 338 figure (Gardner, 2004), which was based on non-narrow reading. In addition, children gradually expand their reading interests as they mature (LaBrant, 1958), which suggests that the words encountered in narrow reading will be somewhat different as children read more.

In conclusion, both Gardner studies, contrary to the statements made by the author, show that reading narratives can make a substantial contribution to the development of academic vocabulary.

NOTE:

The entire corpus contained 823 different acquirable academic words that occurred only in narrative or only in expository texts (Gardner, 2004, table 7). It included 78 acquirable academic words that were in both (Table 8). Thus, it contained a total of 901 acquirable academic words. Of the 901, 260 were only in narrative texts. Thus the total number of acquirable academic words in narrative texts was 260 + 78 = 338.

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Stephen D. Krashen is Emeritus Professor of Education, the University of Southern California. He is best known for his work in establishing a general theory of second-language acquisition, as the cofounder of the Natural Approach, and as the inventor of sheltered subject matter teaching. He is the author of numerous books, including *Condemned Without a Trial: Bogus Arguments Against Bilingual Education* (1999), *Every Person a Reader: An Alternative to the California Task Force Report on Reading (1997), and Under Attack: The Case Against Bilingual Education (1997)*, all available from Heinemann.

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APPENDIX

Frequency of Appearance of Academic Words Appearing in Narrow Narrative texts (from Gardner, 2008; Appendix B).

	Westword	Mystery	Mummy
wagon	87		
brown	23		
path	23		
tall	23		
feet	19	20	7
edge	18		
legs	18		
slowly	15		
log	14		
chapter	13		
yellow	13		
clean	12		
tiny	12		
roof	12		
climbed	11		
hair	11		
thick	11		
flat	11		
stove	11		
fat	10		
noses	10		7 (nose)
bare	9		
warm	9		
smoke	9		

tired	9		
bit	8		
empty	8		
snug	8		
thin	8		
tin	8		
bottom	8		
hole	8		
pork	8		
quickly	8	10	
shut	8		
tight	8		
climb	7		
curved	7		
pale	7		
pan	7		
plate	7		
slope	7		
wet	7		
overhead	6		
washed	6		
crack	6		
foot	6		
hurried	6		
mittons	6		
quiet	6		
suddenly	6		12
cat		99	
breath		62	
bone		60	
club		49	
diamond		38	
baseball		18	
police		17	
fur		14	
project		13	
kids		13	
probably		12	
parents		12	
nose		11	7

whispered		10	
notebook		11	
extra		9	
vocabulary		9	
undersigned		8	
whereas		8	
apartment		8	
locked		8	
pet		8	
afternoon		7	
hurried		7	
nodded		7	
pocket		7	
removed		7	
tail		7	
kitchen		7	
lot		7	19
telephone		7	
quit		6	
relief		6	
sorry		6	
fun		6	
desk			17
finally			12
liked			12
tea			12
job			11
bit			10
gray			10
corner			10
nice			10
clock			9
funny			9
hall			9
hit			9
kitchen			9
mysterious			9
slowly			9
chair			8

tower			8
cream			8
worried			8
chapter			7
gonna			7
odd			7
sick			7
leather			7
radio			7
grinned			6
angry			6
cap			6
chess			6
hair			6
scared			6
sigh			6

Westward Movement
Wilder, L. I. (1971a). Little house in the big woods (rev. ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
Wilder, L. I. (1971b). Little house on the prairie (rev. ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
Wilder, L. I. (1971c). Farmer boy (rev. ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
Wilder, L. I. (1971d). On the banks of Plum Creek (rev. ed.). New York: Harper & Row.

Mystery
Kehret, P. (1995a). Frightmares: Cat burglar on the prowl. New York: Pocket Books.
Kehret, P. (1995b). Frightmares: Don't go near Mrs. Tallie. New York: Pocket Books.
Kehret, P. (1996a). Frightmares: Backstage fright. New York: Pocket Books.
Kehret, P. (1996b). Frightmares: Screaming eagles. New York: Pocket Books.

Mummy
Bellairs, J. (1978). The treasure of Alpheus Winterborn. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
Bellairs, J. (1983). The mummy, the will, and the crypt. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

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