

Dealing with English Fever

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There is no question that English is crucial in today's world, but the usual approaches to EFL, often based on popular folk-theories of language acquisition, are inefficient. Based on what is known about how language is acquired, age differences, literacy development and bilingual education, a different and less strenuous approach is recommended, featuring comprehensible input-based methodology, recreational reading, and a strong education in the primary language. This program need not begin in early childhood, and is intended to provide the EFL student with the tools to continue to improve in English after formal instruction has ended.

English fever = the overwhelming desire to (1) acquire English, (2) ensure that one's children acquire English, as a second or foreign language.

ENGLISH: THE WORLD'S SECOND LANGUAGE

There is a good reason why so many people suffer from English fever. English has become the world's second language, the world's lingua franca. In fact, it is safe to say that it is difficult in today's world to be active and successful in international business, politics, scholarship, or science without considerable competence in English.

Possibly the best overall indication of the dominance of English is the internet. As of 2001, 45% of the 500 million web users were native English speakers (Statue of the Internet Report, US Internet Council and International Technology and Trade Associates, Ltd., 2001; also reported in Krebs, 2001). Nevertheless over 75% of websites linked to secure servers in 1999 were in English (Press, 2000).

Without question, English has become the language of science. In 1997, 95% of the articles cited in the Science Citation Index were written in English, up from 83% in 1977 (Garfield, 1998). This increase is not due to more work being done by scholars in English-speaking countries; the contributions of scholars from non-English speaking countries are substantial and increasing. It is due to more scholars from non-English speaking countries publishing in English. In 1977, 6% of all published papers were in German. This dropped to 1.5% by 1997, but during the same time period the number of scientific papers published by German scholars rose from

about 24,000 to about 50,000 (Garfield, 1998).

The Pasteur Institute in Paris changed the language of its journal from French to English (Garfield, 1989). The editors explained that in 1973 only about 15% of articles submitted to the journal were in English, but in 1987 100% were. The journal still accepts articles written in French, however.

Coury (2001) reported what most readers of this paper know already from their own experience. She investigated the language use of 20 Brazilian academics who were university lecturers as well as researchers. All used English to communicate with scholars around the world by e-mail, all read professional literature in English, and wrote papers in English. Nineteen said they did research on the internet in English, and eighteen said they used English to talk to other scholars at international conventions. All reported that there was pressure on them to produce work in English.

The International Civil Aviation authority has recommended that English be the "default" language in ground-to-air communications; English is used if the communication is not possible in the language normally used by the ground station. This means that most international air traffic uses English (de Lotliniere, 2001).

WHAT THEY WANT AND WHAT THEY NEED

The central concern of many language students and parents is accent and apparent fluency, what Cummins (2000) refers to as "conversational" language. From the uses of English surveyed above, however, a reasonable conclusion is that the needs for English in today's world coincide with what Cummins refers to as "academic language," the use of language for cognitively demanding purposes.

The usual approaches to English fever are to offer English to very young children (and sometimes require it) and to provide a lot of it. Two "common-sense" but incorrect assumptions underlie this approach: (1) Young children are superior at language acquisition: They "soak up" other languages effortlessly. (2) It takes years of schooling to master a language. These folk beliefs appear to be supported by the apparent success of Canadian immersion programs, programs in which, it is reported, children begin the second language at kindergarten, are immersed in the language throughout the entire school day for years, and attain very high levels of proficiency.

The situation in Taiwan is typical. In the words of one writer, studying English has

become a "national obsession" in Taiwan (Liu, 2002), and there are "high demands" for students to begin English as early as possible, in grade one and kindergarten (Chang, 2003). Also, English is a popular subject in cram schools; in Taiwan in 2000, about 29% of all primary school students were studying at cram schools (Taiwan Headlines, 2000).

A DIFFERENT VIEW

I propose here a plan that is more efficient, and, at the same time, is easier and less expensive than the usual options. A few preliminaries need to be discussed first, however. I list below some central findings from the research that are relevant to the discussion:

Comprehensible Input

We acquire language when we receive comprehensible input in a low anxiety situation, that is, when we understand what people say to us and when we understand what we read. This is the core of a general theory of language acquisition, a combination of the Comprehension (a.k.a. Input) Hypothesis and the Affective Filter Hypothesis (for evidence and discussion of current controversies, see Krashen, 2002). We do not, in other words, acquire language by learning about language, by study of the rules and by memorizing vocabulary.

The importance of recreational reading

Free voluntary reading is an extremely powerful form of comprehensible input, and it is delivered in a low-anxiety environment. Those who participate in free reading programs in school make superior gains in reading, vocabulary, grammar, and writing (Krashen, 1993, 2002).

Younger is not faster

Contrary to popular opinion, younger acquirers are not faster at language acquisition. Rather, older children are faster, in the short run, than younger children, and adults are faster than children. In the long run, however, children do better than adults, that is, those who begin second language acquisition as children have the potential of achieving native-like proficiency, but those who begin as adults generally do not (Krashen, Scarcella, and Long, 1978). It should be pointed out, however, that adults, given enough comprehensible input and a reasonably low-anxiety environment, typically achieve very high levels of competence in second languages.

The development of a good accent

It is true that studies of immigrant children show that those who begin second language acquisition before puberty tend to develop native accents and those who start later typically do not. It is also true, however, that many who start later develop excellent accents, very close to native, and many who start foreign languages young do not. For example, "heritage language" speakers, those who speak a minority language at home (e.g. American-born Chinese living in the US) often speak the heritage language with an accent, even though they have been hearing it and speaking it their entire lives. In addition to age, another variable appears to be at work, what Smith (1988) calls "club membership": we acquire the accents of the group we feel we are a member of, or feel we can join. This explains why children do not talk exactly the way their parents talk - they talk the way their friends talk. (Accent may be a result of a reluctance to talk in a certain way, not a lack of competence. For speculation, see Krashen, 2003.)

The role of the first language

Several decades ago, it was thought that the first language actively interfered with second language acquisition, that habits from the first language had to be eliminated or there would be "interference." Research since then is more consistent with the position that the first language does not interfere; rather, we "fall back" on the structures and rules of our first language in the absence of second language competence (Newmark, 1966; Krashen, 1983). Thus, the cure for first language influence is simply more second language acquisition.

Recent theorizing, inspired by work in bilingual education, presents a different

view, one in which the first language can accelerate second language acquisition. This happens in two ways: First, and most relevant for this discussion, education in the first language supplies background knowledge, which can help make input in the second language more comprehensible. Second, providing literacy in the first language is a short cut to second language literacy: If we in fact learn to read by understanding what is on the page (a version of the Comprehension Hypothesis; Smith, 1994), it is easier to learn to read in a language one understands. And once one learns to read in any language, it is much easier to learn to read in another; developing reading ability in one language is a short-cut to developing reading ability in any other language, even when the writing systems are different.

Some of the evidence supporting this position comes from evaluations of bilingual programs, programs in which minority language children are provided with subject matter knowledge and literacy in the first language, along with plenty of comprehensible input in the second language. Students in these programs acquire at least as much of the second language as those in non- bilingual programs in which all instruction is in the majority language, and usually acquire more. This position also explains the success of children who arrive as immigrants in another country while of school age, and who do well in school, succeeding academically and acquiring the majority language well. These children, in every case, had a good education in their own country before emigrating. They had "de facto" bilingual education: Subject matter instruction and literacy development in the primary language (Krashen, 1996; 1999a).

SOME SUGGESTIONS

If the hypotheses presented above are correct:

We can modify our goals

The idea of comprehensible input allows us to adopt more reasonable goals for classroom language instruction. All we need do in language pedagogy is to help students reach the intermediate level, defined as the level at which students have acquired enough of the language to continue to acquire on their own. In other words, they can then obtain comprehensible input outside the language classroom. This means that the goal of the language class is not to produce error-free performance and complete understanding of all rules of grammar. (Note that a pure

"skill-building" view of language acquisition, one that presumes that direct instruction, exercises and drills are the true and only path, predicts that use of the language outside the classroom is a waste of time.)

Steven Sternfeld (personal communication) has pointed out that in a sense it doesn't matter how much of the second language students acquire in a given pedagogical program. What matters is whether they have the motivation and tools to continue to acquire after the course has ended. Thus, students need to know how language is acquired. A knowledge of language acquisition theory also helps justify methodology. The methodology proposed here differs from the "traditional" approach, and some students may need reassurance that the method is based on a coherent theory and that it works. A review of what is known about language acquisition can be done initially in the primary language, and eventually done in more detail as sheltered subject matter. S. Y. Lee (1998) provides evidence that providing adult EFL students with a knowledge of theory has a positive effect, when presented before a sustained silent reading program began.

Language classes should be filled with comprehensible input

At the beginning level there are excellent methods that clearly do this, such as Total Physical Response (Asher, 1994) and Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell, 1983) and the empirical research confirms that they are consistently more effective than traditional programs on most measures; at worst, they are equivalent (Krashen, 2002). At the intermediate level, we can continue to provide comprehensible input through sheltered subject matter teaching, or content-based instruction, classes in which the focus is on providing subject matter instruction in a comprehensible way to second language acquirers (Krashen, 1992).

We can provide a powerful supplement to regular pedagogy in the form of recreational reading

This can be done in the form of sustained silent reading or other forms of in-class free voluntary reading (Krashen, 1993, 2003). Students need not read the classics in these sessions. In fact, in some successful programs students begin with very easy graded readers (Mason and Krashen, 1997) and we have had great success using adolescent literature ("teen romances") with adult ESL students (Cho and Krashen, 1994, 1995a, 1995b).

The recommendation to lower our standards is not a rejection of great literature; rather, it is in the service of literature. Light reading provides a bridge that makes the reading of more demanding literature comprehensible. It is the missing link in nearly all second and foreign language teaching programs.

Free voluntary reading in English can be done in three stages: (1) graded readers, that is, books written especially for language students; (2) easy authentic reading (light novels, comics, magazines), and finally (3) demanding authentic reading. Stage (1) can be done as part of beginning EFL. Stage (2) can be part of sheltered subject matter teaching (see below). Stage (3) might be attained only after the regular EFL program is completed. (Note: the stages are not strict; students are allowed to skip forward and back, to recycle. Given enough reading, new grammar ("i+1") and vocabulary will be covered in adequate doses; Krashen, 1981).

Include sheltered popular literature

A means of combining sheltered subject matter teaching and recreational reading is the establishment of sheltered popular literature classes. The goal of these classes is to introduce students to popular literature, to what is available to them for pleasure reading in the second or foreign language, in the hope of helping students establish a pleasure reading habit in the second language (Krashen, 1999b).

Improve libraries

Libraries are crucial to the success of this kind of foreign language program. In foreign language situations, students do not generally have access to comprehensible input outside of class. We can provide comprehensible input in the form of libraries, libraries filled, of course, with interesting books and magazines, but also filled with interesting audiotapes and videotapes. Such a library, open to the public, allows foreign language students to continue to obtain both aural and written comprehensible input long after the class is over. Such libraries would be enormously beneficial to those who need to bring their competence to high levels and to those who need a refresher before travel.

Maintain strong first language education

Strong second/foreign language education should not weaken first language education. The first language can contribute background knowledge and literacy development that stimulates second language development, and of course advanced first language development stimulates advanced cognitive development.

English need not be taught in massive doses

Recall that our goal is not to develop native-like proficiency: Our goal is only to help students reach the intermediate stage, so they can continue to improve on their own. How long it takes to reach this goal is an open question, but it is likely that one period per day for several years, with effective methodology, is enough. The failures of foreign language education in the past were not, in my opinion, due to the lack of time devoted to the language; the failures were due to the methodology.

We need not start at very early ages

An early start is less efficient and does not guarantee a native accent. There is no need for preschool cram school English, no need to start English at kindergarten. There is, however, a need to build subject matter knowledge and literacy through the primary language. This is the current view of the Ministry of Education in Taiwan (Chang, 2003; see also Han, 2003, for discussion). There is, in addition, no practical demand for young children who do not live in English-speaking countries to speak English. Devoting only one period per day to EFL, and delaying EFL until the middle school years leaves sufficient room for serious study of and in the primary language. (Starting later is a preferred option in foreign language programs, but may not be in second language programs. In programs designed for minority language children, there is an urgent practical need for early second language competence. We start English through ESL right away in bilingual programs in the US.)

To summarize, current research in my view supports the following: base methodology on comprehensible input, include recreational reading, don't be concerned about a super-early start, aim to develop intermediates (not perfect speakers), don't sacrifice developing the first language, and provide the means for continuing to improve after the program ends. This is, I think, an easier path.

CANADIAN IMMERSION REVISITED

At the start of this paper, I noted that it was the success of Canadian immersion programs that inspired, at least in part, the movement to start foreign languages early, and to provide all-day immersion experiences. In other words, an early start and massive amounts of exposure were considered by many to be the important factors.

It is clear that immersion has been successful: Students in these programs are far better in the second language than those who do regular foreign language study. But age and amount of exposure are not, in my view, the crucial factors. I hypothesize that the crucial factors are the fact that the methodology is comprehensible input-based and the first language is used in a way that accelerates second language development.

There is good evidence against the hypothesis that age is the crucial factor in immersion: Those who begin immersion programs later, in middle school, eventually catch up to those who do "early total immersion" on most measures of competence (Swain and Lapkin, 1982). Even if this were not so, what is crucial is that late immersion also clearly produces intermediates, students who know enough of the language to improve on their own.

Immersion programs are loaded with comprehensible input: The core of immersion, in fact, is teaching subject matter in a comprehensible way to second language acquirers. In order to ensure comprehensibility, no native speakers are allowed in the classes, and students are allowed to respond in their first language for the first year and a half of the program. Immersion, in fact, was the inspiration for sheltered subject matter teaching.

Successful immersion programs are bilingual programs. They include subject matter teaching and literacy in the first language, and their goal is to develop bilingualism. In addition, in every case reported in the professional literature that goes beyond the earliest school years, students in successful immersion programs were middle class, which means that they had access to a great deal of reading material in the primary language outside of school, and typically developed a reading habit in the primary language. In other words, immersion students had a form of de facto bilingual education (Krashen, 1996).

In other words, immersion succeeds for the same reasons all successful programs

succeed.

WHAT ABOUT ACCENT?

As noted earlier, it is true that those who begin second (not foreign) language acquisition tend to acquire native-like accents, but I also suggested that club membership was an important factor. If this is true, what club should our foreign language students join? The good news is that the use of English does not automatically entail loyalty to, or even sympathy with English-speaking countries or native speakers of English. English is now firmly an international language, Star Trek's "standard." The only club EFL students need to join is the club of people who speak English well, citizens of their own country with regular dealings with those from other countries.

WHAT ABOUT WRITING?

In the US, foreign language education has little need to be concerned with writing. For English as a foreign language, the situation is very different. As noted earlier, a large percentage of communications are in English today. Professionals who write in English are expected to write at the native or near- native level.

The first prerequisite for the ability to write at a high professional level is of course reading, massive reading of the kind of writing one is expected to produce. As Smith (1988) has noted, "To learn to write for newspapers, you must read newspapers; textbooks about them will not suffice. For magazines, brose through magazines rather than through correspondence courses on magazine writing. To write poetry, read it ..." (p. 68).

General reading of the kind recommended earlier will help bring the future writer to the point where specialized texts are comprehensible. Moreover, reading anything will help all writing, thanks to similarities among prose styles (Biber, 1986), but real professionals must master all the subtleties of writing in their own field, and this comes only after a great deal of professional reading.

It is clearly impossible to include professional reading as part of an EFL program, and it is inefficient to try. This kind of reading needs to come later, once the future writer has begun specific education in the chosen profession.

Research has not yet begun to be done in this area, but I suspect that when it is done it will reveal that advanced EFL writers have acquired an impressive amount of the approved writing style of their professions. In fact, I think it is safe to predict that their competence in many areas of expository prose exceeds those of non-professional native speakers. They often, however, have gaps in late-acquired peripheral aspects of writing, conventions of writing that contribute little or nothing to actual communication, but have only a cosmetic effect.

Someday, because of the influence of nonnative writers of English (recall that they are now a majority on the internet), English expository prose might evolve; some of what is considered ungrammatical today may, in a few decades, be grammatical, and more aspects of institutionalized non-native varieties of English (e.g. Indian English, Nigerian English; Kachru, 1992) may be considered acceptable for international written communication. But until that happens, EFL writers must obey all current conventions and supply all the "cosmetic" aspects of language. Just how to close this gap is not yet clear.

One thing we do know: Formal instruction is not the answer. In addition to the demonstrated limited effects of formal instruction (Krashen, 2002), many advanced writers of EFL are obviously fully conversant with the known rules of writing; in fact, many are teachers of advanced writing in English as a foreign language and even do research in the field. What is clear is that these problems can and should be dealt with long after the formal EFL program is finished.

The composing process

Developing formal competence is only part of the story with writing, however. Competent writers also need to master the composing process, strategies that help them use writing to solve problems, stimulate cognitive development, and avoid writing blocks. Good writers, it has been reported, begin with a plan but are willing to change the plan, are willing to revise, pause to reread what they have written, delay editing until their ideas are clear on the page, and engage in regular daily writing rather than "binge writing" (Krashen, 1984; Rose, 1984; Boice, 1994).

The scant evidence available so far (Lee and Krashen, 2002) supports the hypothesis that at least some aspects of the composing process are universal in written languages, and that there is transfer from the first to the second language. If this is true, writers only need to develop the composing process once, in the primary language: Those who develop an efficient composing process in the first language

will also have one in their second language.

If expository writing is developed through massive reading of appropriate texts, and if the composing process need only be taught in the primary language, and if primary language education is solid, we do not need to pay as much attention to writing in the foreign language as previous programs have. Given the awkwardness of writing in a foreign language for those with little competence, and given the huge amount of time teaching writing demands of teachers, this is indeed good news.

DEALING WITH ENGLISH FEVER

The cure for English fever is a program in English that does not threaten first language development, and that is relatively easy to do, one that does not require the advantages of being upper middle class. The program suggested here attempts to meet these conditions. My prediction is that such a program will not only be easier to do, it will be more effective than what we have tried in the past.

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