



# Story Time

Can the Public Library Help Young Children Acquire a Second Language When It Is Not Spoken at Home?

## Research

In a study of middle-class kindergarten children in India, Kalia and Reese (2009) reported that the best predictor of scores on an aural English vocabulary test was “book reading,” a combination of the number of children’s books in the home, parents’ familiarity with children’s books popular in India, and frequency of reading aloud to the children. The reading aloud was in English: the researchers reported that in India, “middle-class parents who regularly read to their children used English books” (p. 130).

Of great interest was the finding that book reading was a stronger predictor of English competence than parents’ conversational use of English with the child. In fact, while parents speaking English to the child at home was positively related to vocabulary knowledge, it did not reach statistical significance in a multiple regression analysis.

This result is consistent with a great deal of research showing the value of read-alouds and listening to stories for first-language development (Senechal et al., 1996; Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini, 1995; Blok, 1999; Denton and West, 2002) as well as second-language development (Mason and Krashen, 2004; Mason, 2005; Mason et al., 2009; Lee, Lee, and Krashen, 2014).

Kalia and Reese also reported that parents’ efforts to teach English words to their children had no impact on vocabulary scores, a result consistent with studies showing that listening to stories is more time efficient than direct study for second-language vocabulary development (Mason and Krashen, 2004; Mason, 2005; Mason et al., 2009). We return to this finding below.

## Case Histories

Cho (2016) provides additional support from a case history of San, a child in Korea: at the time this paper was written, San, age eleven, had attained a remarkable level of English competence even though he had little exposure to English outside of school, thanks to his English reading habit.

His path to English reading began when he was five. San’s mother read aloud to him in English for one hour a day until he reached second grade, with mother and son acting out parts of the stories. San’s mother spoke English to San only during these sessions. In fact, she described her English as limited. The combination again appears to be use of the L1 at home, supplemented by story listening—that is, stories supplemented by various ways of helping make the new language comprehensible.

Cho reported that these sessions stopped when Sam was in second grade, “when he complained that his mother’s English was not good enough.” The sessions succeeded in helping bring San to the point where he could read at least some English books on his own.

**Yunlin Shi and Stephen Krashen** suggest a comfortable, low-cost introduction to second language that preserves development of the first language.



## George and Michael

George and Michael, about the same age and currently playmates in kindergarten, are both acquiring English as a second language. We do not have the results of formal testing, but it is obvious to all observers that George is far more proficient in English than Michael in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

George was born in China and came to the U.S. when he was four. Michael was born in the U.S. and grew up in a Spanish-speaking household in Florida.

In neither case did the parents speak English to their children. George's parents, however, were highly proficient in English and read stories to him in English, even when he was a baby. His mother estimates that they read English stories to him about eight hours per week.

It must be pointed out that George's mother did not simply read stories exactly as they were written. She reported that she felt free to simplify the language (e.g., use shorter sentences) and made the story more comprehensible with the use of pictures and gestures. She also said that she did not worry about whether George understood every word or not.

Her only concern was that George understand and enjoy the story. She assumed that fuller knowledge of the language would emerge in time.

George had the advantage of having an American tutor for one hour per week when he was three years old. His tutor emphasized reading interesting stories to George, which she made comprehensible in ways similar to how George's mother did, and did not force him to speak English, in agreement with current language-acquisition theory, which claims that we acquire language from input, not from output.

Both George and Michael had a great deal of additional exposure to English through television and videos, and George took taekwon do classes in English after his family came to the U.S. Because of these additional sources, we cannot conclude that it was the stories George's mother read to him that made the difference in his development of English, but the large difference in input through stories and the modest amount of comprehensible input from other sources makes it likely that stories were the crucial difference in input between the boys.

## The Ideal Solution for Preschool Children?

Use of the first language at home for communication, supplemented with stories in English, may be the ideal solution for parents wanting their preschool children to begin to acquire a second language. There are clear advantages to using the first language at home: better parent-child communication and continuing development of the first language, which leads to practical (job-related), cognitive, and psychological advantages (Crawford and Krashen, 2015).

In cases in which parents are unable to read stories in the second language to their children and tutors and preschool programs are not available or affordable, it may help to take advantage of story time at the local public library. Several pleasurable story-time visits a week could make a huge difference for children like Michael.

If public libraries want to use story time to help beginning acquirers of the second language, it will require some planning. For beginners and even low intermediates in the second language, simply reading a story as

it is written will not work: special efforts need to be made to be sure the stories are comprehensible.

We suggest that librarians pay particular attention to an approach developed by Beniko Mason, called story listening. Story listening is not the same as reading aloud. In story listening, the teacher tells a story of universal interest (Mason uses folktales, such as those collected by the Grimm brothers) and makes the story comprehensible with the use of drawings done as the story is told, simplified and slower language, occasional explanations in the second language, and occasional translations of an unfamiliar word.

There is no expectation that the

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children will master the new vocabulary from exposure in a single story: as was the case with George's mother, those who do story listening accept that acquisition is gradual, and with more input (more stories), more acquisition will take place.

Thus far, the published research on story listening is impressive; it has been shown to be far more efficient than traditional instruction in vocabulary acquisition, with more vocabulary acquired in a given amount of time, even though there is no effort made at "teaching" new words.

Story listening is easy for teachers to learn and requires no special equipment (Mason and Krashen, 2004; Mason et al., 2009; for additional information and examples, see [www.storiesfirst.org](http://www.storiesfirst.org)).

We are basing our suggestion on only one empirical study and two case histories. Nevertheless, the suggestion is consistent with theory and research in language development and is low risk and inexpensive. It deserves a trial.

References available at <https://www.languagemagazine.com/references-story-time-august-2018/>

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