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Abstract

In order to test the common belief that the language of stories is too simple and thus cannot prepare readers for more challenging material a study was conducted to analyze texts from beginning French classrooms to determine the amount of low frequency, specialized language beginning learners encounter in stories as compared to the language they encounter in a traditional foreign language textbook. The results suggest that the use of stories increases the amount of language encountered, including lower frequency, specialized words needed for later more dense, academic texts. Students in the Story-Listening class read dramatically more, about 7.5 times more without any more time devoted to reading and clearly without being aware of extra effort.

Keywords: lower frequency word, story-listening, story-reading, textbook reading.

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The Conduit Hypothesis states that stories can be a conduit or bridge to rich, specialized language. Reading and listening to stories provides the language and knowledge that makes more “academic” reading comprehensible and stimulates an interest in reading (Krashen, 2018).

A common belief is that the language of stories is too simple and thus cannot prepare readers for more challenging material: they need deliberate study and exposure to more complex language. To see if this is the case, this study analyzed texts from beginning French classrooms to determine the amount of low frequency, specialized language beginning learners encounter in stories as compared to the language they encounter in a traditional foreign language textbook.

Procedure

Instructors in two public high school classrooms tracked all texts read during the first 50 class periods of French I. A total of 62 public school French as a Foreign Language students began the study with no prior French instruction. Both classes met for 90 minutes daily and were taught by instructors with similar educational levels and experience. One classroom used a textbook as their primary text. The other classroom heard and then read stories from Beniko Mason’s 100 First Stories for Story Listening (Mason, 2017).

Group 1: Textbook

The first instructor presented students (n=30) with the level 1 *Bien Dit!* textbook by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. During their first 50 French lessons, students read texts from the first 70 pages, chapters 1-2. Two other high school teachers from the same district reported reading roughly the same amount of text in this textbook in the first 50 class periods.

French text appeared as lists, headings, captions, modified Cloze passages, reading passages, etc. The book did not include strong narratives, but instead presented short scenes or conversations (e.g. students introducing themselves to classmates). The instructor supplemented the textbook with oral and written activities, as well as tests from the textbook series. The instructor estimated the average score on assessments was 80-85%.

Group 2: Story-listening

During their first 50 French lessons, a second classroom of 32 students heard and read 50 narrative fiction texts adapted by the teacher. For most of the class period, students listened to an oral version of the story with comprehension-aiding supplementations such as gestures, drawings, context, and occasional use of L1. (Krashen, Mason, & Smith, 2018) using an approach called Story-Listening, developed by Beniko Mason (Mason & Pendergast, 1997; Mason & Krashen, 2004; Mason, 2014).

The students then read the text version of the same story for the last 5-15 minutes of class. The primary assessment consisted of students self-reporting how much they understood after reading the text version. Students reported understanding an average of 83% of texts.

Results

Table 1 shows the total of all word tokens found in the two sets of texts, that is, the total number of words. For the traditional text, all words in French were analyzed, including chapter headings and activity directions, although proper nouns were excluded. The analysis was completed with the Lextutor.ca Lexical Profiler.

The total number of words in the text used by the traditional class (Bien Dit) was 3,622. In the same time period, students listening to and reading stories encountered 27,410 total words in French. As presented in table 1, the percentage of less frequent words (least

frequent 1,000 and 2,000 words) encountered by the two groups of students was nearly identical.

Total Words, Analysis of Frequency

	Total words	1-1000 highest frequency words	1001-2000 highest frequency words	over 2000 frequency
Bien Dit Textbook	3622	2893	179 (84.8%)	550 (15.2%)
Story-Listening texts	27410	21527	1887 (85.4%)	3996 (14.6%)

Discussion

Through traditional tales, beginning language learners got significant exposure to specialized language. This data suggests that the use of stories increases the amount of language encountered, including lower frequency, specialized words needed for later more dense, academic texts. The results parallel those of Hsieh, Wang and Lee (2011), who reported that English storybooks read aloud to children acquiring English in Taiwan were far richer in vocabulary and syntax than textbooks used in EFL classes.

Students in the Story-Listening class read dramatically more, about 7.5 times more without any more time devoted to reading and clearly without being aware of extra effort.

This study examined only the amount and types of input provided; it only shows that those who listened to and read stories had more potential to acquire less frequently used

vocabulary than traditional students did. It did not demonstrate that the story-listening students did, in fact, acquire them.

The results of other studies, however, suggest that comprehensible stories promote L2 acquisition (e.g. Hsieh, Wang, and Lee, 2011; Lee, Lee, and Krashen, 2014; Mason and Krashen, 2004, 2018; Mason, Yanata, Yander, Borsch and Krashen, 2009; Clarke, 2019).

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