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## **The Power of “Short and Simple Books”: How Mahmoud Hessabi Acquired German**

### **Abstract**

World famous physicist Mahmoud Hessabi began to acquire German at age 60 and according to one native speaker achieved a high level of proficiency largely through reading, beginning with “short and simple” books and progressing to more demanding texts.

### **The Power of “Short and Simple Books”: How Mahmoud Hessabi Acquired German**

Perhaps the most famous Iranian scientist of all time, world-renowned physicist Mahmoud Hessabi (1902-1992), was also an accomplished polyglot, fluent in Farsi, Arabic, English, French and German, with some knowledge of seven other languages. Dr. Hessabi was born in Iran, lived in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon with his family as a child, studied in Paris, and did research in United States. These experiences certainly contributed to his knowledge of Farsi, Arabic, English and French. He never lived in a German-speaking country, but was quite competent in German. In this paper, we discuss how this happened, as described by his son, Iraj Hessabi, in a book, *Master of Love: A Closer Look at the Life and Efforts of Professor Mahmoud Hessabi, the Father of Modern Physics and Engineering in Iran* (Hessabi, 2009, p.77):

“Once on a trip to Germany, my father found himself unable to ask a question about one of the items in a local store. At that moment he decided to learn German and devoted every night thereafter to studying German before he went to bed. My father never changed his plans under any circumstances if he set his mind to doing something. I remember he would always say: “Because I started learning German at an older age, if I don’t practice every night I will forget the language easily. I need to study German for at least half an hour to 45 minutes every single night before I go to sleep, it is a promise I have made to myself.” (translated from Farsi by N.A.)

“Practice,” for Dr. Hessabi, included reading. A friend who was a native speaker of German living in Geneva learned about Dr. Hessabi’s interest in German and “started sending him short and simple books that were used for teaching German to language learners. After a few years she was sending complex philosophical German books and wrote in one of her letters:

‘I feel as if I am writing to a famous German philosopher. I teach German at the University of Geneva and direct the German language section of the Geneva Library. However, every time I receive a letter from you I find myself looking some of the words you used up in the dictionary to find their definitions. If someone didn’t know you personally, they would think that your mother tongue is German.’”

In an interview, Iraj Hessabi was asked what Dr. Hessabi’s reading schedule was like (Lavasani et al., 2002): Iraj went on to say:

“...he started learning the German language at the age of 60. He made a plan to study German for half an hour each night and stuck to that plan for the rest of his life [He died at age 90]. During his last days before he passed away while in the hospital one of the nurses took me aside and told me: “I saw that your father was reading a novel, I told him that he just had a major surgery and needed to get some rest. He told me that he wasn’t reading a novel, he was learning German.”

Dr. Hessabi’s experience is consistent with the massive research showing that we acquire language by understanding messages, as well as the research showing that reading is an excellent source of input in both first and second languages. (Krashen, 2003, 2004).

His experience is also consistent with methodology developed by Beniko Mason (Mason, 2019) for second/foreign language teaching. After an initial period of listening to interesting stories in the second language, her adult English students in Japan read graded readers in English for about two years (initially “short and simple books” designed for language students) gradually moving into “authentic” books in English, books written by and for native speakers. Studies show that this kind of reading produces very impressive gains in English competence, as measured by standardized tests (Krashen and Mason, 2017). It appears that this is what happened to Dr. Hessabi: the short and simple books provided the linguistic competence that made reading authentic books possible.

There are gaps in our knowledge of this case:

- There was no formal testing of Dr. Hessabi's German competence. His friend's evaluation of his competence, however, should be not ignored.
- It can be argued that he is a special case, someone "gifted" in language acquisition. It has been hypothesized, however, that given an optimal language acquisition environment, we all acquire language successfully and at similar rates, suggesting that we all have the same capacity for second language acquisition (Krashen, 2019).

Reading can be a central part of this optimal environment.

- it can be argued that Dr. Hessabi was highly motivated. But motivation combined with traditional methodology does not produce these kinds of results (see especially the case of Gouin, described in Krashen, 2014). Dr. Hessabi's high motivation may have played a role, however: it was the reason he read German texts. But it was the reading, we hypothesize, that was responsible for his progress.
- We don't know how much time Dr. Hessabi spent on formal study of grammar and vocabulary and we don't know if he had any contact with German speakers. We can thus only say that his results are consistent with the "reading hypothesis" but do not eliminate the possibility that "study" may have helped, although research thus far strongly suggests that there are severe limits to how much language can consciously learned and applied (Krashen, 2003).

It must be pointed out that this report is not the only case history showing impressive progress in a second language through reading (e.g. Krashen, 2014; Cho, 2017; Mason and Krashen, 2017, 2019). What is clear is that the path from "simple and short" reading to authentic pleasure reading deserves more attention in the language teaching profession.

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