

Self-selected fiction: The path to academic success?

By *Stephen Krashen*

Snapshot

Professor Emeritus Stephen Krashen explores recent research that highlights the power of fiction to support academic success.

The Common Core emphasized nonfiction and the use of 'informational' texts in order to prepare students for academics. But there is exciting news: there is evidence showing fiction might do a better job. And the best kind of fiction may be the fiction students select themselves, not 'assigned reading.' All this comes from recent research.

Vocabulary

Studies done with speakers of English as a first language not only show that reading fiction a better predictor of vocabulary size among adults than nonfiction (Sullivan and Brown, 2014. Centre for Longitudinal Studies, University of London), but also that the vocabulary used in fiction is what young readers need for academic success:

...vocabulary used in fiction is what young readers need for academic success...

- McQuillan (Reading Matrix, 2019) examined the vocabulary used in 22 novels written for young people (e.g. Nancy Drew, Twilight) and reported that the texts included 85% of the words on academic vocabulary word lists, and many appeared frequently enough to make acquisition of these words likely: 44% appeared 12 times or more.
- Rolls and Rogers (English for Specific Purposes, 2017) found that if a person read one million words of science-fiction (about a year's worth of pleasure reading), the reader would encounter nearly all of the 318 science words that appear on a list of words that appear in different areas of science, with nearly half (445) appearing ten or more times.
- Green (Lingua, in press) examined over 5000 contemporary novels, and concluded that they contained more than 90% of the academic vocabulary in students' high school textbooks in a variety of subjects.

Green examined over 5000 contemporary novels, and concluded that they contained more than 90% of the academic vocabulary in students' high school textbooks...

Self-selection helps makes sure the reading is interesting; In Lee (RELC Journal, 2007), university level Taiwanese students of English as a foreign language who did self-selected reading made

superior gains in general vocabulary compared to comparisons who did assigned reading, and gains for 'academic' words were not significantly different, confirming that self-selection is helpful for academic language development. The books read by both groups were largely fiction.

Knowledge

Fiction is not only a good source of academic vocabulary, it is also an important source of academic knowledge. Studies (e. g. Stanovich and Cunningham, *Cognition*, 1992) show that those who read more know more about history, literature and science.

Fiction is not only a good source of academic vocabulary, it is also an important source of academic knowledge.

Among adults who are regular readers, a large percentage of what they read is fiction; about half of what women read and about one-third of what men read (National Endowment of the Arts, 2015; p. 86) is fiction. (Does self-selected nonfiction reading do a better job teaching content than study? Maybe. Filback and Krashen (*Knowledge Quest*, 2002) found that frequency of voluntary reading of the bible was more closely related to biblical knowledge than years of formal 'bible study.')

The path of pleasure

It may be the case that we can best prepare our ESL students for academic success not with painful drills and exercises and demanding (and sometimes boring) informational texts but by providing them with easy access to reading material that they find extremely interesting. It may be the case that path of pleasure is more effective than the path of pain.

Editor Note: This article first appeared in the *CATESOL Newsletter*, April, 2020, pp. 1-2, it is reprinted here with the kind permission of the author and the permission of CATESOL. The article appears on Krashen's website [here](#).

Stephen Krashen is Professor Emeritus at the University of Southern California, he is highly respected linguist and educational researcher. Krashen has written hundreds of articles in his areas of expertise and is well known in the area of school librarianship for his work in the area of free voluntary reading and in particular for his book *The Power of Reading* (2004). He shares his work online at: <http://www.sdkrashen.com/>