

Response to Aka: Supplementing extensive reading with bi- & multi-modal input

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Aka (2019) conducted an important year-long large-scale study demonstrating that Japanese high school students who undertook extensive reading performed better than a control group who undertook grammatical instruction. Those showing the greatest gains were those of lower and intermediate proficiency. The students' achievement was measured in terms of language knowledge and reading ability. Aka compared the achievement of a control group of 205 students with an experimental group of 200 students. Both groups had 6 English classes a week. The lessons common to both groups were 3 hours of intensive reading and 1 hour of listening. The difference was that the control group had an additional 2 hours of grammar instruction, whereas the experimental group had 2 hours of extensive reading. Aka stated that the purpose of the study was to investigate whether “reading skills would improve through extensive reading, rather than listening skills” (p. 6).

According to Aka (2019), one advantage of extensive reading is that it presents a vastly greater amount of vocabulary than that is found in Japanese school textbooks. The extent of input is clearly important, but so is the quality. This paper argues that the mono-modal input mode of extensive reading programs neglects critical features for reading comprehension, such as intonation, which could be provided with bi-modal input. Intonation may be overlooked because native speakers know that learners may make segmental errors but not necessarily those of intonation (Wells, 2006). Because intonation is acquired so early by L1 English speakers, it tends to be below the level of conscious awareness; untrained teachers may not have the necessary awareness of intonation to teach it. Teachers may be unaware of the students' lack of knowledge of the implications of intonation (Reed & Michaud, 2015). Hence the teaching of intonation tends to be neglected in favor of grammar and vocabulary. Nevertheless, proficient readers superimpose prosodic features onto the written text during the reading process (Fodor, 2002; Gross, Millett, Bartek, Hampton Bredell & Winegard, 2013).

Limitations of Mono-modal Input

Written language has been described by Vygotsky (1986) as a double abstraction because both the interlocutor and the sound of the language are missing; it lacks “the musical, expressive, intonational qualities of oral speech” (p. 191). According to Havelock (1986), writing is “a visual artifact designed to trigger the memory of a series of linguistic noises by symbolic association” (p. 112). Awareness of these limitations of the written language is not reflected in many extensive reading programs, in which the input is in the mono-modal channel of reading. As

Cheetham (2017) explains, traditional second language teaching tends to be characterized by mono-modal input. This may result in unbalanced progress in the respective skills, such as poor listening skills despite advanced reading skills, or vice versa. Cheetham (2017) recommends considering bi- or multi-modal input to be the norm and mono-modal input the exception; bi- or multi-modal input enhances functional working memory, which in turn enhances language learning.

One distinctive feature of English intonation is its extensive pitch range. According to Rajan (Rajan, 2015), English language intonation is an outlier in its very extreme use of pitch contours in everyday discourse to convey intent. Normal English intonation is sometimes perceived as exaggerated by English learners (Reed & Michaud, 2015). Learners need to be made aware that this wide range of pitch contributes to the communication of the message in terms of both grammar and pragmatics.

Intonation and Grammar

In second language English classrooms, intonation may be thought of as simply characterizing emotional states. However, Wells (2006) explains that intonation serves to highlight grammatical structures in spoken English by demarcating the beginning and ending of clauses and sentences. Levis and Wichmann (2015) identify syntax-intonation mapping in the reading aloud of written English. Halliday (1985) insists that English in particular “makes a great deal of use of intonation to carry grammatical meaning” (p. 49). The overlapping functions of grammar and intonation suggest the superiority of bi-modal over mono-modal input for learners of reading in English.

Intonation and Pragmatics

Pragmatics explains the difference between the face-value of the words and the underlying meaning: “You learn to read irony, indirection, incongruities of all kinds. You learn to pick up on dissonance—for example, differences between sound and text” (Wajnryb, 2002, p. 21). For example, this is evidenced in the ironic use of “Yeah, right” to express disagreement. Intonation signals this dissonance, which is not apparent from the words alone. Reed and Michaud (2015) call for teachers to provide explicit instruction regarding the pragmatic function of intonation, “telling learners directly that intonation can trump the words in an utterance and signal specific alternate meanings” (p. 464).

Intonation highlights salient aspects of speaker’s intent which are not apparent from the written words. Levis and Wichman (2015, p. 150) explain that the placement of prominent intonation (see line 1) highlights new information, and the lack of prominent intonation (see line 2) indicates common knowledge:

1. *Can you give me some money?*
2. *Well I can lend you some money.*

Intonation and Working Memory

Crystal (2016) argues that intonation is a critical factor in listening comprehension, and describes how intonation facilitates working memory. He explains that spoken English intonation units typically comprise 5 or 6 words, and that the last word in the intonation unit is usually stressed. Working memory, in the form of the phonological loop, functions during reading; readers need to remember the last few seconds of what they have read in order to comprehend what comes afterwards (Walter, 2008). The use of intonation in working memory is unlikely when mono-modal extensive reading is carried out by second language learners who do not have adequate familiarity with the intonation contours of English.

Applying Cheetham's (2017) Bi- & Multi-Modal Input to Extensive Reading Practice

Because intonation carries grammatical meaning (Halliday, 1985) and facilitates working memory (Crystal, 2016), and because working memory is activated in proficient reading (Walter, 2008), second language learners would arguably benefit from bi-modal extensive reading, such as reading-while-listening, rather than mono-modal extensive reading. The black and white marks on the printed page do not necessarily suggest the same intonation contours to beginning second language readers as proficient second language readers and first language readers. Native-speaking teachers may take these intonation contours for granted, and may not be aware that beginning second language learners cannot do this for themselves. The notion that second language readers' proficiency can be enhanced by reading has been challenged by Walter (2008), who argues that they "need to be better at mentally representing spoken language" (p. 470). Mental representations of spoken language clearly include those of intonation contours.

Recent pedagogical innovations and technological improvements have made extensive reading-while-listening increasingly available. Commercial programs offer both written passages and their audio-recordings, and some publishers offer CDs to accompany their graded readers or downloadable audio. When the data in Aka's (2019) paper was collected (2014-2015) there was less availability of audio-recordings of extensive graded reader collections, and Cheetham's (2017) important paper had not been published. Currently, because of the current availability of audio, it is suggested that future extensive reading programs exploit bi-modal rather than mono-modal input.

Nevertheless, there may be limits as to the effectiveness of technology to facilitate second language acquisition. There are aspects of second language acquisition which may be most efficiently learnt in the meaningful context of human relationships, which are necessarily bilateral, and require the integration of eye contact, postures and gestures in real time (see Thornbury, 2013). The interaction between the teacher and the class is interpersonal; in the act of reading aloud to a class the teachers gauge the interaction of the students as they read to them. Therefore, the live reading aloud of stories to a class will further supplement extensive reading programs. Live readings by the teacher are only possible when the class meets, and when the members disperse, reading-while-listening to audiobooks is a suitable method for private study.

Many of the findings about bi- and multi-modal input have appeared after Aka's (2019) data collection. Those building on Aka's work could expand her first research question "Will a one-

year extensive reading instruction program improve learners' language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) and reading abilities?" (p. 5) to "Will a one-year bi- (or multi-) modal extensive reading instruction program improve learners' language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) and reading abilities?"

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