Vocabulary acquisition, input, and extensive reading: A conversation

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J ALT member Joseph Poulshock recently posted a video entitled "How do humans acquire language?" to the extensive reading (ER) website BeeOasis.com. In it, he describes his Acquire Language by Understanding Messages (ALBUM) theory, by which he means that the comprehension of input—for example, through ER—is the best way to acquire a second language.

The video prompted an online discussion in which a number of JALT members exchanged ideas about the acquisition of vocabulary, the role of ER in the acquisition of various aspects of word knowledge, and the relative importance of input to the language acquisition process. An abbreviated version of this conversation is presented here.

Racine: I've seen Joseph's video. But I can't say that I agree with the notion that ER is the most efficient means of acquiring vocabulary.

Benevides: It depends on what you mean by "efficient". If you want your students to memorize a long list of new words quickly, say to improve a TOEIC score next month, then ER isn't the way to go. However, to develop and retain a strong vocabulary over time—say a year and longer—the student who is doing ER will certainly outperform the one who is not. I don't see that the video says anything controversial. What exactly are you disagreeing with?

Racine: I'm reacting to the way Joseph draws a parallel between ER and Krashen's (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) Input Hypothesis. Most ER proponents are not saying that "input only" is the most effective method for language gains. Much of the learning is actually done in supplementary activities, raising awareness, etc. It's an empirical question as to how much of the ER and how much of the intensive study lead to the best gains.

It's not necessarily the case that the ER student will outperform the non-reader a year later either. Elgort (2011) has shown that intensive study with word cards does lead to implicit knowledge and productive use. If I study word cards for an hour each night and you just read, I think my vocabulary will show greater gains a year from now than yours will. Either way, it

would be very difficult to draw strong conclusions from that kind of study. Many confounding factors would crop up along the way.

Anyway, don't get me wrong, I think there are many good reasons for ER to be included in any well-balanced reading program. I just don't think *efficient* vocabulary learning is one of its selling points.

Benevides: I think most ER proponents would agree that ER plus some kind of instruction is effective, but may still argue that ER is the most important. For instance, ER surely helps readers to develop a facility in guessing unknown meanings of known words from their context, as well as a broader knowledge of collocates—neither of which are often included in assessments of vocabulary learning "efficiency".

Graham-Marr: I don't agree with Joseph's ALBUM theory either. It implies a "sufficiency" condition that isn't justified by the research. Krashen (2002a) claims that comprehensible input (CI) is a necessary and sufficient condition for second language acquisition and that output has no role to play in the process. For a small minority of learners CI has been documented as sufficient, but for most people "noticing" leads to greater acquisition and that is enhanced by output.

Coulson: Many undergraduate students in Japan do not have vocabulary greater in size than five or six thousand words and probably a lot less than that (e.g., Barrow, Nakanishi, & Ishino, 1999; Shillaw, 1995). On the other hand, some of my very fluent overseas graduate students typically have a much larger vocabulary size. There is a clear *qualitative* difference for these students in terms of both receptive and productive skills. So I think our students could usefully learn an additional X-thousand words, both filling in gaps in their semantic networks and adding low-frequency and academic vocabulary items. Explicit learning of supplementary vocabulary is one of the major predictors of future expert users of the language. I view ER as vital in consolidating high-frequency vocabulary and related syntax, and absolutely essential for decoding and fluency training in reading English. But as for building an expert vocabulary…? That comes down to motivation. Words lists, essentially, are effective.

Racine: I agree with David that the real vocabulary gains are usually made through intensive study. And I don't think the idea that ER aids long-term consolidation in memory more so than intensive vocabulary study methods is borne out in the literature. So many conditions have to be met: reading materials have to be in the 95 to 98% lexical comprehension range (Hsueh-Chao & Nation, 2000; Laufer, 1989), you have to meet the unknown words six to eight times to be learned at all (e.g., Horst, Cobb, & Meara, 1998; Waring & Takaki, 2003), you have to see the words again at optimally spaced intervals to retain them (see Ebbinghaus, 1885/1964), etc.

Browne: I'm not sure why anyone would think there is anything incompatible about ER and learning new words via flashcards. Like John said, there is ample empirical research showing that the direct study of English via flashcards is a fast and efficient way to increase word knowledge of unknown words. The *Word Engine* system I helped to develop, is based on research (Browne & Culligan, 2008) that shows that despite knowledge of hundreds of very low-frequency words, average Japanese EFL learners have huge gaps in their knowledge of core high-frequency words such as those in the GSL (General Service List; West, 1953). Identifying these words and then systematically targeting these words through flashcard learning is a very useful way to dramatically increase their coverage of the high-frequency (or special purpose) vocabulary words that they need. Does this give them full knowledge of the 18 aspects of word knowledge identified by Paul Nation (2001, Chapter 2; see also Browne, 2012)? Of course not. This is where ER is a fantastic complement to flashcard learning.

Though the pace of learning new words via ER is extremely slow compared to flashcards, there are so many benefits of ER. First off, it contextualizes the words they are studying, giving collocational and other information in naturally occurring contexts. Second, it gets Japanese students to actually read and to read A LOT. As you know, one of the main thrusts of secondary English education in Japan is to force students to "read" (i.e., translate) texts so far above their level that it has disastrous effects on their confidence and motivation (Browne, 1996, 1998). ER is great for building confidence and motivation and great for the slow-track learning and contextualizing of new vocabulary. But it is NOT good at what flashcards are great at—the rapid acquisition of (usually receptive) knowledge on a large number of targeted high-frequency or special purpose vocabulary words. In other words, ER

and flashcard learning can and should be done in conjunction with each other since they are so complementary.

Graham-Marr: While I agree with what Charles just said, there are some who proclaim that intensive study—flashcards included—is NOT effective and that anything that takes time away from CI (i.e., comprehensible input, time taken away from understanding messages) is time that is lost. This position is, as Charles has mentioned, not in line with current research, but it IS the position held by Krashen and some of his followers like Joseph. ER is great. I'm a huge promoter of it, but it's not sufficient in and of itself.

Poulshock: But Krashen also wrote: "comprehension is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for language acquisition. Other conditions must be met: an open attitude, or low affective filter," (Krashen, 2002b, p. 395) etc. At the same time, I think he does argue for the supremacy of CI. So that raises a question, what's the best balance between input and output? In my video, I say that we need more input than output. So the ALBUM Theory provides a guiding principle for learners: read and listen to as many enjoyable, interesting, informative, and comprehensible messages as you can. Is that so controversial?

Racine: No, there is nothing controversial—and certainly nothing detrimental!—in having our students take in as much enjoyable and interesting reading/listening materials as possible. My critique was simply about learning efficiency.

Charles, I don't think anyone believes word cards and ER are incompatible. Yes, ER ideally provides contextual/collocational information that increases depth of word knowledge, but even this can be provided through intensive study. My point about efficient vocabulary acquisition also applies to these other aspects of word knowledge. For example: Even if our students know the word *fear*, they may have to encounter the phrase *for fear of* as many as 15 times before they acquire that particular usage (Webb, Newton, & Chang, 2013). If it was on the word card—or "collocation card"—it may very well be acquired sooner.

Waring: Yes, there are different types of word knowledge, some of which can be learned intentionally (spelling and colligations, for example). But some can't be learned intentionally: the sense of what words sound good together, a sense of whether a word or phrase is used more in the US or the UK, a sense of a word's frequency in English, its pragmatic use, etc. These latter ones tend to be picked up from exposure. We can analyze texts to find this out, but of course most people don't do this. They build up this sense over a lifetime. So when people say *X* is best for vocabulary learning, I ask, what knowledge types are you talking about? Some activities would be good for learning spellings, but useless for picking up a sense of collocation. Criticizing ER for slower uptake rates for new words than intentional learning misses the point because that's not the main reason people read extensively. The aim is to build fluency and have the language wash over you in a subconscious way. We all know we say *blonde hair*, not *blonde car*, but we can't say *why* we know or *how* we know. It's that sense of language that ER helps to build. When reading, you may notice something you didn't notice before. You can add that to your knowledge, but that's not the main intention. That's why it's called *incidental* learning. I feel it's a straw man argument to criticize ER for not doing everything. Would we criticize a Ferrari for not being able to carry cement?

Racine: I agree that discourse-level aspects of language might very well be acquired more easily through long reading passages. My point was that acquisition is unlikely without consciousness-raising, focus-on-form or some other type of noticing activity—not to mention output, as Alastair suggested. ER is excellent exposure to a wide variety of language forms, but I can't help but see the parallels between some of the claims people are making about ER now and what Krashen was saying about "input only" back in the day. I don't believe that learning an L2 occurs via the same process that children acquire an L1, i.e., through mere exposure. But I do agree that building up a sense of a language over a lifetime is an excellent goal so we should get our students reading and listening to as much as possible, as soon as possible. I am not criticizing ER for all the good it does. I was only criticizing false claims about it. In other words, don't get rid of your Lotus just because you can't fit a Great Dane in it.

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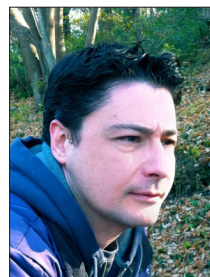
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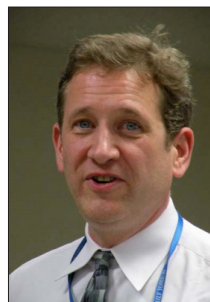
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TLT RESOURCES
MY SHARE

…with Donny Anderson & Chris Wharton

To contact the editors:
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Salutations and welcome to another edition of *My Share*. We hope you have found ways to beat the heat as the dog days of summer set in and the temperatures rise. This month's *My Share* offering is certain to pique your interest in spite of the heat. John Spiri forwards an activity to help students practice responding rapidly to questions, Mark Swanson facilitates short student-researched presentations given across a school term, Kazuko Namba helps students hone their descriptive writing skills, and Nathan Ducker provides an idea for encouraging the development of group unity and subsequently providing closure as a course draws to an end. So, pour yourself a cold drink and take a few minutes out to pore over this cool collection.

This month also marks the editorial debut of a new *My Share* duo. Donny Anderson hails from the United States and currently resides in Mie Prefecture, where he teaches English across the lifespan in area schools and other public venues