Free Voluntary Reading and Comprehensible Input

by Miriam Patrick

Three and a half years into my journey of using Comprehensible Input and leaving the textbook behind, I started doing research on Free Voluntary Reading. As a child, I had greatly enjoyed reading and it was something my students had a hard time grasping. Similarly, my own brother nearly stopped reading all together when his school adopted the Accelerated Reader program, which assigns points for reading and testing on books. His love for reading was later reignited when, as a family, we started reading the Harry Potter series. I want my own students to have a similar experience and enjoy reading.

I began with what I already knew about acquiring language,'we acquire language when we understand messages, when we understand what people tell us and when we understand what we read' (Krashen, 2004, p. 1). When input is comprehensible subconscious acquisition of the language occurs[1]. I then began to read more about the Compelling Input Hypothesis. This is an important piece of language acquisition often overlooked by language programs and teachers. Krashen (2011) states that, in addition to the comprehensibility of input, another key aspect of language acquisition is how compelling learners find the input provided. The example that Krashen gives in his 2011 article is that of Daniel. Daniel, a native Mandarin speaker who came to the United States as a young child, was losing proficiency and interest in the language. He was sent to classes, but showed little interest and enthusiasm. This changed,

however, when Daniel was given a free reading book in Mandarin. The key to the change was that Daniel enjoyed the book and found its content compelling. Krashen goes on to note that Daniel started to show subconscious improvement that not only his teacher, but also his mother, noticed. Daniel began asking explicitly for more stories and content in Mandarin, further improving his skills.

Krashen's research in this case study also notes that the compelling hypothesis does not only apply to reading, but also to any input given, whether it be through listening, watching, and even engaging in social situations. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on using choice and compelling material to build a Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) in the classroom setting.

FVR: An Ongoing Journey

I started using Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) three years ago with students who were in Latin II. I had spent the weeks leading up to our spring semester reading lesson plans and activities that were created by elementary school teachers. My own mother, who has taught with students aged five to twelve her entire career, recommended this to me when I explored with her this idea of reading. We specifically looked at lessons that discussed reading strategies. From this in-context research I began to build a model for my second-year Latin students

that would explore FVR in an environment that was supportive and low stress[2]. In order to achieve this goal, I set up a system that took advantage of student choice, as well as peer and teacher support. Students voted for their top three choices of the Latin novellas we had, based on a brief description of the book. Students were then placed in groups based on their book choice with the vast majority of students getting their first choice of novella. Students worked, as groups, every Friday for a semester. Students were held accountable through a project that asked them to find a creative way to share their experience of reading the book.

The results of this first experiment in my own classroom had mixed results. Some students ultimately did not like the books they had chosen and wished they could have changed their books. This was not given as an option, and so some students held a bit of resentment towards the project and their books. Others enjoyed having a group to work with. These groups often had projects that were objectively better, and reported a better understanding and better results each Friday. The last group of students, in an attempt to ensure they had the group they wanted, decided on a book together, rather than giving their honest choices in the survey. These groups often sped through a book, with little discussion and understanding, in order to have more time with each other. This first experience with FVR taught me quite a bit and ultimately changed the way I did things in subsequent years.

The next year, based on student feedback and my own observations, students read individually. They again chose books based on the back cover descriptions, but were allowed to change their books as needed, if they were to find that they didn't enjoy the book. Students read on Mondays and Wednesdays at the beginning of class. Instead of a final project, students were asked to reflect on their reading in a journal each Friday. This process presented its own issues in that students often struggled with their first choice of book, thus spending the following day or two attempting to find a new one they would enjoy. Students who struggled with the reading, or who had changed books, began to resent the journal time, feeling as if they had nothing to say. Students remarked that they felt like they were giving a book report, and did not feel like the journal time was effective. During that year, I also began a formal study into choice reading through the book *The Reading Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child*. The insights I found in Donalyn Miller's book greatly informed my third, and current, year with FVR.

FVR: The Awakening

When I had started my in-context research through elementary school reading lessons, I suspected that further research would show the similarities between learning to read in one's first language and learning to read in a second (or third) language. Miller's book *The Reading Whisperer* showed my suspicion to be true and provided me with valuable steps to set up a successful FVR experience for myself and my students.

Miller (2009) identifies three types of categories of readers and argues that everyone falls into one of these three: developing, dormant, and underground. Developing readers are often referred to as struggling readers who 'for any number of reasons, including inadequate reading experiences or learning disabilities… are not reading at grade level' (Miller, 2009, p. 24). These students, despite what many feel is an inability to read, have lacked the support to make what most consider adequate success in reading (referred to as grade level). Miller notes that while developing readers may lag behind their peers, with proper support and access to compelling and comprehensible reading,

they have the chance to feel successful as readers. This mirrors the outcome Krashen found in his case study with Daniel. Through comprehensible and compelling readings, the learner acquired the language.

The second type of reader Miller (2009) designates is the dormant reader. Like my own brother, these readers have had the desire to and interest in reading taken from them through regular testing, grading, and demands that turn reading from something pleasurable to a required activity with little to no choice and freedom. As shown in my own experience with readers who had wanted to change books, Miller discusses the importance of choice and its effect on readers: 'By denying students the opportunity to choose their own books to read, teachers are giving students a fish year after year but never teaching them to go near the water, much less fish for themselves' (2009, p. 29). Miller continues to discuss the risk that these particular readers may fall through the cracks. Unlike the developing reader, they have enough independent reading skill to do what is necessary to appear successful, but, as in the case with my brother, run the risk of falling behind because they choose not to read for lack of compelling material.

The third and final type of reader according to Miller is the underground reader. I will readily admit that I fall into this category. During my own school experience, I was often chastised by my teachers for choosing to read my own books after finishing my work. Similarly, Miller marks this type of reader as one who 'just wants to read and for the teacher to get out of the way and let them'(2009, p. 30). While developing readers do not often get enough support and dormant readers fall through the cracks, underground readers often do not have the freedom they need to further their own skills, resulting in frustration. As in my own situation, this frustration manifested itself in a personal habit of carrying as many books as I can in my bag or hands and spending my free time in the school library.

My own experience in the first years reflects Miller's research. Those developing readers enjoyed having the support of a group and struggled when held to a writing standard without it. The dormant readers did what was required of them, but quickly moved towards more

compelling activities when possible. The underground readers demonstrated a mix of these results, depending on their interest in the book. In this third year of FVR, I have taken into account both my own experiences, the feedback of students, and now Miller's research in reading. These things have greatly informed the process I now have in place as well as the discussions I have with other teachers.

FVR: The Introduction

For the rest of this article, I am focusing on the implementation of Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) in the classroom setting. In this current year, I am teaching Latin I, II, and IV. All of these students participate in FVR in my classroom, but the first steps have been different for each group. However, a discussion should also be held about a teacher's first steps in setting up the FVR environment in the classroom.

Many other languages (although not all) have a plethora of novellas at a variety of levels. There are major publishing companies that regularly publish books for Spanish, French, and German students using the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language guidelines to identify readings as novice, intermediate, advanced, or superior. For Latin, however, until recently, these resources have been non-existent. The first Latin novella was published in 2015 as a short novella for novice readers[3]. As of today, there are quite a few more from both independent and small publishing groups alike. These novellas include a variety of genres from historical to mythological to contemporary. Most of these novellas are written by Latin teachers for their own students and, therefore, contain material students will find compelling and comprehensible. A list of these novellas is readily available online through a variety of sources. For the purposes of this article, I referenced John Piazza's list of novellas (2019a).

For those who do not, for whatever reason, have access to these novellas, there are a few suggestions on how to implement FVR.

1. Teachers can access the online preview copies of the novellas (which can also be found via Piazza's list or by visiting

any author's website who may offer a preview). In many cases students may have electronic access in the classroom or on their own personal device.

2. Many teachers who use Comprehensible Input in their classroom use an activity called Story Listening. During this, teachers tell stories to students and draw pictures to illustrate as they go. The key to this particular activity is to make the story comprehensible[4]. If a teacher uses this activity to provide comprehensible input to students, those stories can be easily turned into easy reading for FVR.

3. A number of teachers and bloggers have pointed to the practice of creating classroom stories as a starting place for a class library. In my own district, we provide these types of readings, along with others, online via our 'reading library'. Students are able to access these from anywhere.

4. John Piazza points to a number of free Latin story libraries online. These include his own list of readings, the *Mille Noctes* readings (which are mostly historically and mythologically based), and the *Latina Hilara* archive. These are already created stories that can be shared with students for reading.

Once your library is established in print, online, or both, it is time to introduce the process to students. It is my practice to do this a little differently depending on the level of student I am speaking to. For example, in Latin I, I waited until the spring semester to introduce the idea of FVR to my students. I waited to see that my students were ready for this venture of reading on their own[5]. For my Latin II students, I introduced FVR in the beginning of the school year, in the fall. Despite these differences, the rest of the introduction process was very much identical in each of these lower level classes. The first step was to discuss the process of what we do and why.

FVR: The Cornerstone

'Reading is not the add-on to the class. It is the cornerstone. The books we are reading and what we notice and wonder about our books feeds all of the instruction and learning in the class' (Miller, 2009, p. 50). FVR (and subsequently reading for pleasure) can be seen as an extra activity and, in some students' minds, busy work. When it is presented as the cornerstone of the classroom, and treated as such by both the teacher and students, it becomes much more important, and enjoyable. When I start FVR in each class, each semester, there are a few things that are essential to what I say:

1. We all read, even the teacher. Miller calls this the 'reading role model' (2009, p. 50). Students take their cues from us and if we don't honour the time we ask them to honour, it will seem like time that can be thrown away. In my own class, I read with my students and I share with them what I am reading. In previous years, I would go from group to group, or I would watch over their shoulders, perhaps, in their point of view, more as a warden than a teacher. Now, I am a willing and happy participant in this time that we share.

2. We read twice a week. Reading is mandatory. The voluntary part is in the choice of book. My experience has been similar to Miller's. The first few times, students read because they have to. Soon after, however, the preparation for it (getting one's novella) is second nature. Shortly after that, students start asking for more time to read. Some ask to take their books home. Some stay after to talk to me about what they read. Now, when students have a question, they just come and ask me for help. The fact that I read with them has not taken away my support; they still see me as the expert in the room when assistance is needed.

3. We all need a break. FVR is held at the very beginning of class, before any other routines or activities are done. It is a time to read, but also a time to refresh one's mind and prepare for class. For some students, this is how they get their mind ready to work in another language. For others, this is how they decompress after a stressful class or assessment. Sometimes, students need this time to calm down and press the 'reset' button on their minds, emotions, and day. Similarly, once students start to read for upwards of 12 minutes, I remind them that if they need a break, to take one. It should be short, and not a distraction from reading.

4. The research is clear. Every year, and as often as necessary, I hold discussions with my students about what we do any why. It is important to me that they understand the research behind the decisions I make as their teacher. Reading is a form of input and one we have readily available. When we understand what we read, we acquire language (Krashen, 2000). As they read, students will acquire new vocabulary and be exposed to a variety of forms of storytelling. Reading and re-reading will only benefit them.

5. Go as slowly as needed and do not use others as the barometer for your own success. This is a concept that can be difficult for students to grasp, especially if they are motivated and feel anxious about progress via grades and scores. If student A sees student B finishing a book before them, they may start to keep a mental tally of how many books they have read compared to student B. If this pattern continues, student A may become less motivated to read, or even embarrassed of their own reading ability. I would suggest that teachers take a moment to point out the differences in the lengths and levels of books and remind students that if they don't understand the words, they need to slow down and re-read. This is also where the first point in this section becomes a connecting point with students. Sometimes, even as teachers, we read and re-read. If students see their teachers as experiencing the journey alongside them and as a role model for reading and re-reading, they will follow suit.

This discussion can take some time and, as Miller points out, students 'begin each school year filled with hope that this year will be more interesting and engaging than the last, and yet, the drudgery that surrounds reading continues, year in, year out.' (2009, p. 34). Having this conversation with students is the first part of helping students be successful readers in the target language.

FVR: Setting the Stage

Miller (2009) discusses eight considerations when one looks at successful learning. The introduction to FVR with students is the first step. It provides clear expectations and defines responsibility. The next step is to provide as much of an immersive experience as possible. In my classroom, this immersive environment consists of a deskless classroom (and during FVR time, extended freedom in seating choice), a series of bookshelves which house our novellas, and a playlist of music that plays on occasion as needed for students. The bookshelves are low to the ground and often students will sit on the floor with the bookshelves and flip through books. Students often choose a different seating position to read in than they do during active time during class. It is also often a different position than they choose to take assessments in. Comfort is key in this experience.

Another aspect of the physical environment that is important is consistency. Students read in my classes on Mondays and Wednesday and rarely is there a schedule change unless absolutely necessary. Students come into class and get their novellas of choice before the bell rings; they are ready to begin the moment I walk in. The fact that we read so regularly has become second nature to the students. If someone forgets, a quick reminder of the day of the week is all that is needed most times to prompt them to get their books. This consistency provides students scheduled, regular, and expected time to practise this skill of reading.

The last aspect of the physical environment that cannot be stressed enough is the use of the teacher as the role model for reading. Students can hear a teacher typing on a computer, grading papers, or moving items around a room. They can see a teacher who is distracted or using the time they are reading to catch up on other things. If this time is not sacred to all, it is sacred to none.

FVR: Using the Library

Once the discussion is had and the space is set, the most exciting and pivotal moment arrives: choosing a book. Some students will cherish this moment and take their time and others, most of whom may not have been taught (or allowed) to enjoy this process, may rush and grab the first book off the shelf. This presents a few problems in the space of FVR.

Firstly, the speed at which students make this decision can raise the affective filter that can prevent language acquisition (Krashen, 2006). Students who hastily grab the first book they touch will become bored quickly waiting for others. Those developing readers may not understand the process the others are part of and the dormant readers may be embarrassed; their affective filters are already raised and on alert. Secondly, students who choose books quickly and without thought rarely enjoy the books they've chosen, especially when they begin to hear about others' choices. Even if they feel the need to choose another book, they may not say anything, instead choosing to jump through the 'hoop' that reading has become for them or shutting down on account of their anxieties.

In Miller's experience, she asks students to brainstorm ways they choose books to read. Her students are reading in their first language and have already had these experiences. In our case, as language teachers, we need to apply these principles to books in a language which students are just beginning to acquire. On the first day of FVR, encourage students to go through a process that may include many ways of evaluating a book:

1. Does the book look good? A cover's design can be a telling sign of the book's contents. An adventure book may have a busier cover than a mythology story. A mythological story may make use of specific colours and images to give one an idea of the main character or storyline. Some books show the main character on the cover. Others make use of fonts. All of these can help students get a beginning idea of what is inside the cover.

2. Does the book feel good to hold? This is not necessarily an official recommendation in any source, but it is one my students have found helpful. Some of the books have a matte finish and are, therefore, softer to the touch. The thickness of a book may be telling of either the complexity of the language, or the complexity and detail of the story. Some students may want larger books because of larger font sizes, with which they have an easier time reading.

3. What do you already know about the topic and author? As a Latin teacher and author, my students have an idea of what to expect from my books. The same goes for the books written by my colleagues. Some authors have more than one book and it is easy to spot series. Mythological and historical books have a clue to their contents that original stories do not necessarily have, in that students may have already heard and know some details, possibly making the text more comprehensible.

4. Are there pictures? As Krashen pointed in his study of Daniel, the use of pictures can be incredibly useful to students who are acquiring language. They provide another form of input that students can use (2011).

One of the takeaways of this process is that students begin actually looking at the books they choose. Their experience begins before even opening the book, creating a more fully immersive experience.

FVR: The Final Chapter

It's the end of the week and the first days of reading have gone well. Students are starting to ask what comes next. Miller (2009) calls this 'testing the teacher', but there are many opinions on what to do as students read.

John Piazza discusses his process using FVR and holding students accountable. He suggests using a reading log to track progress that a teacher can quickly review and assess. He goes on to say that he finds 'structure and follow-up activities are central to a long-term successful FVR program' (Piazza, 2019b, p.1). Drawing on his own experience and the examples of others he also suggests using reading circles or group discussions and asking students to write book reviews.

Another opinion comes from Mike Peto who draws on Janice L. Pilgreen's book *The SSR Handbook*[6]. Peto discusses Pilgreen's notes about follow-up activities and their connection to successful programs. Peto provides an example similar to Piazza's reading log in a reading journal. However, unlike Piazza's example, Peto uses this in reaction to students not respecting the reading time. Peto also uses small group discussions, as Piazza does.

Finally, Peto leads students through new books to help familiarise them with the content and choose a book. In an opposing view, Lance Piantaginni points to the word free, 'it's best to avoid assessments and accountability'(2015, p.1).

In my first year using FVR, students were required to complete a final project for each book read, with mixed success. In my second year, students completed a weekly journal entry about their reading. By the third year, I'd completed my study of Miller's book and had read a larger and more varied amount of experiences and research on the matter. While I appreciate the importance of and place of accountability, I do not agree that it is always correlated to a successful program. I have seen much more success this year, across levels, with this new process of individual reading, complete free choice, and full immersion in the experience, than I ever saw with my accountability measures. Miller writes, 'The fact is that scores of the children who enter our classrooms are students who like to read or once did, before years of traditional reading instruction…, book reports, and whole-class novel units made the experience of reading boring and painful' (Miller, 2009, p. 32-33). Bearing all this in mind, two Fridays a month, we gather in my class for book club. Students can speak as much as they want or as little as they want, but the idea is to share what we've read and what we've enjoyed. It is an informal setting and it goes as long as it needs to for students to build their reading community. Some weeks, little is said. Others, students share insights about their books, make recommendations for each other, and often ask my opinions on what they are reading.

FVR: The Epilogue

For far too long, reading has been an activity forced upon students. What was once a way to explore new worlds and experience new things has become the bane of many students' daily lives. While many adults find reading enjoyable and important, an overabundance of testing, grades, and accountability has stripped this point of view from the students who come into our rooms every day. The fact remains, however, that reading is an excellent form of input for students of

language. The research is also clear: reading leads to language acquisition. The caveat, of course, to all of this is that readings be compelling and comprehensible.

A Free Voluntary Reading program is a quick and easy way to provide such material to students. They are easy to start and, in the right environment, maintain themselves over time. While some argue that accountability in one form or another is a direct correlation to a successful FVR program, Miller's example of a fully immersive environment has proven itself in my own experiences.

Miriam Patrick, Parkview High School,
miriamcpatrick@gmail.com

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[1] Subconscious acquisition differs from conscious learning. Subconscious acquisition results in the 'emergence of grammatical structure in a predictable order' (Krashen, 2004, p. 1). Conscious learning, which is studied using the Monitor Hypothesis shows that explicit grammar instruction has only a modest impact (Krashen, 2004).

[2] Krashen states in his paper, 'Applying the Comprehension Hypothesis: Some Suggestions', that a strong affective filter is a high-stress situation which 'prevents input from reaching those parts of the brain that do language acquisition' (2).

[3] In full disclosure, I must admit that I am both one of the two authors and also the publisher of this first novella: *Pluto: fabula amoris.*

[4] Krashen notes this concept in his article 'A Fulfilling Journey of Language Acquisition via Story Listening and Reading: A Case of an Adult Scholar' (2019). In this particular case, an adult scholar listened to compelling stories before moving to reading to help acquire English.

[5] I was able to determine this by their proficiency in reading the stories I gave them and, more importantly, when they started asking about the books in my room that we weren't reading and inquiring when they'd get the chance to try to read them.

[6] SSR refers to sustained silent reading. Many argue that Free Voluntary Reading and SSR do not refer to the same activity. Lance Piantaginni notes this in his own writing, 'If all students are reading the same book, it's known as Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), although Mike said that he calls it that anyway' (2016, p.1).