

Impressive gains on the TOEIC after one year of comprehensible input, with no output or grammar study

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Beniko Mason, Ed. D. at Shitennoji University in Osaka, Japan first began her Extensive Reading (ER) program in 1984 in Japan. Her first question was whether ER was more effective than the traditional reading method, then whether it alone was better than the eclectic method, and finally whether reading alone was more efficient. She has also reported on how to start and set up an ER program, and what factors contribute to creating a successful ER program.

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"Mr. Tanaka" is an adult who attended a class based on story listening and carried out a personal reading program over one year with the author's guidance. At no time did he "study" English, and at no time did he attempt to speak or write English. He gained 180 points on the TOEIC test in one year, the equivalent of about 63 points on the TOEFL, far more efficient than students in traditional EFL and ESL programs.

THE PROBLEM

Internet shopping mall operator RAKUTEN, Inc. surprised the public by announcing in June 2010 it will make English its official language by 2012. (www.japantimes.co.jp/utimes/pdf/vol_03/ut_vol3_01.pdf).

The Japanese company behind the fast-expanding fashion chain UNIQLO also announced that it plans to make all its staff speak English while at work. Staff will be requested to obtain at least 700 points in the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), a globally recognized benchmark in language ability by March 2012. (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/fashion/fashionnews/7857217/Uniqlo-drops-Japanese-and-makes-English-official-language.html>). The President of RAKUTEN announced that those who did not improve their English in two years would be fired. (<http://news.nifty.com/cs/headline/detail/r25-00002846/1.htm>). Because of this announcement, RAKUTEN employees are now enrolled in crash courses at English conversation schools (<http://news.nifty.com/cs/headline/detail/r25-00002846/1.htm>).



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What can RAKUTEN and UNIQLO employees accomplish in two years? Can the requirement of a 700 TOEIC be met? The RAKUTEN and UNIQLO decisions may not be sensible, but there is no doubt about the importance of English today, and there are ways of reaching high levels of competence in a short time without suffering and without taking expensive courses.

THE SOLUTION

A substantial amount of evidence published over the last 25 years suggests that the best way to improve in English (a foreign language) is to do a great deal of comprehensible, interesting reading, a conclusion that is consistent with the hypothesis that we acquire language and develop literacy when we understand messages (Krashen, 2003, 2004).

In this paper, I report on another case that provides additional evidence for the "reading hypothesis." This case also provides a clear direction for those who need to improve quickly.

Subject

Mr. Tanaka is a 42 year-old man who works in the radiology department in a local hospital in Osaka. He graduated from a two-year vocational school in radiology, and began to work at the age of 20. After his graduation from vocational school, he had not studied English for 20 years. I met Mr. Tanaka in 2008; he is father of one of my private students. All parents are given some orientation about language acquisition and literacy development, and are asked to read my book, *FVR and Fairy and Folk Tale Listening* (Mason, 2006a). In this way, Mr. Tanaka learned about the Reading Hypothesis and became interested in improving his English by reading for pleasure in July of 2008.

Method

After Mr. Tanaka showed an interest in easy English pleasure reading, I loaned him some graded readers from my personal collection of about 200 titles. He started by reading one book a day, a Penguin graded reader at the 200 word level, but soon increased his reading.

I asked Mr. Tanaka to keep a record of his reading in a notebook in Japanese, and record the date he finished the book, the title, the level of the book, the publisher, the number of pages, the time it took him to read the book, and whether or not he liked the book. He was also asked to write a brief summary of the story in Japanese.



I told Mr. Tanaka that he did not have to look up unknown words in the dictionary, but of course could if he wanted to.

RESULTS

Amount read

From July 2008 to July 2010, Mr. Tanaka read over 10,000 pages of English. He has read most of the Macmillan, Penguin, and Oxford graded readers in addition to many of the Perfection Learning Company's books for young adults, some authentic books for young adults (e.g. Marvin Redpost series, some of Judy Blume's and Louis Sachar books) as well as best-sellers (e.g. Twilight).

Test scores

Mr. Tanaka took the TOEIC examination in January, 2009, after reading graded readers (2590 pages, 132 hours) for six months, scoring 475 (255 in listening, and 220 in reading). He thus gained 180 points in one year. Mr. Tanaka enrolled in a class focusing on listening comprehension in English in April 2009, and experienced about 30 hours of listening, hearing stories in class told by the teacher in English.

Between January 2009 and January 2010, Mr. Tanaka read 6456 pages, which took 217 hours. If we include his listening class, his total input time was 247 hours. He took the TOEIC examination again one year later in January 2010, and scored 655 (330 in listening, and 325 in Reading). He thus improved .73 points for each hour spent reading or listening (180 points improvement/247 hours).

COMPARISON WITH TRADITIONAL INSTRUCTION

Pendergast (2010) estimated that college students of English as a foreign language in Japan, majoring in English, gained about 135 points on the TOEIC (from 265 to 400) in four semesters, about 500 hours of instruction that combined traditional instruction with reading. This is .27 points per hour (135/500). Mr. Tanaka was nearly three times as efficient.

CONVERSION TO TOEFL

Another way to estimate Mr. Tanaka's progress is to convert his score in TOEFL equivalents. According to the formula $\text{TOEFL Score} = \text{TOEIC Score} \times 0.348 + 296$, Mr. Tanaka gained 63 TOEFL equivalent points (from 461 to 524) over a year, and .25



points per hour of input and one TOEFL point for every 100 pages read.

This is not as impressive as subjects studied in Mason (2006b) who also did extensive reading in English. They gained an average of one point for every 40 pages read.

Mr. Tanaka was still, however, about twice as efficient as students in a TOEFL preparation class, who gained about .13 TOEFL points for each hour of study (Swinton, discussed in Mason, 2006b).

Table one compares Mr. Tanaka's efficiency to students in traditional programs.

Table 1: Points gained per hour

	Mr. Tanaka	English majors	TOEFL prep
TOEIC	0.73	0.27	
TOEFL	0.25		0.13

English majors: from Pendergast (2010)

TOEFL prep: from Swanton, discussed in Mason (2006b)

CONCLUSION

Mr. Tanaka found time to read every night after he came home from work. He took a class once a week that focused on listening comprehension from April 2009 until January in 2010, where he listened to a story for 30 to 40 minutes in each session. This is all he did. He did not do any grammar study, he did not do any writing in English, and there was no error correction.

He was surprised to learn that he had improved 180 points on the TOEIC in one year. While he was reading he was not sure whether his English ability was improving, a reaction that is typical in true language acquisition situations. But it was obvious that he had been improving, as he was reading higher level books with good comprehension. From reading and listening, he not only gained 180 points on the TOEIC, but he learned to read books and to like reading in English.

Compared to English majors at a junior college, he spent much less money and was twice as efficient. If he worked for RAKUTEN or UNIQLO, he would not have to worry: He would be able to keep his job.

Once again, we see that comprehensible input alone can result in significant improvement in a second language, and once again we see that a comprehension-based method was more efficient than other approaches



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