

# Comprehension is the Key to Efficient Foreign Language Education —Self-Selected Reading and Story-Listening are the Solutions—

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## Introduction

Acquiring English has become quite important in Asia these days. A survey in China showed that 90% of the respondents think that there is an English learning boom in society; 83% of the respondents say learning English can help one find a good job ([www.chinanews.cn](http://www.chinanews.cn)). According to an article in the Taipei News, by 2010, two billion people will be studying English and half the world's population or 3 billion people will speak it (Hirsch, Taipei Times, Wednesday, Aug 01, 2007, Page 2). It has been said that English has already become the world language (e.g. Dornyei, Csizer, & Nemeth, 2006).

The followings are the facts for English dominance (Krashen, 2006). As of 2006,

- 45% of 500 million web users were native English speakers
- Over 75% of websites linked to secure servers in 1999 were in English.
- In 1997, 95% of the articles cited in the Science Citation Index were written in English, up from 83% in 1977. The contributions from scholars from non-English speaking countries are substantial and increasing.

According to Asiaone Education, there are 21 English villages set up to replicate life in a typical small town, complete with mock banks, post offices, grocery stores, cinemas and police stations. There are 60 teachers on the site - 20 Koreans and 40 foreigners from countries like the United States and Canada. The village receives an average of 400 students a week, including 80 or so from needy families whose 160,000 won (US\$176) fees are paid by the government (October 5, 2008: <http://www.asiaone.com/News/Education/Story/A1Story20081003-91378.html>).

On the contrary, in Japan only 54% of the elementary schools have reported that they teach English once a week, 35 lessons per year for 5th and 6th graders (29 hours per year: <http://www.eigokyoikunews.com/news/20090617/15.html>).

## The 2008 TOEFL scores by Japanese test takers

As is the case in other Asian countries, Japan does poorly on international tests of English. On

the 2008 TOEFL exam, Japan ranked in the bottom 15% among about 160 countries. Japan's score was 66 out of a total 120 on the internet Based TOEFL (iBT TOEFL), about one and half standard deviations below the international mean (79.5, sd = 11.2). Taiwan (73) and Korea (78) did not do much better. (Compare to Singapore (100) and Malaysia (88)). Japan's deficit was not limited to oral/aural language: On the reading section of the TOEFL, Japan scored 16, compared to Singapore's 25 and Malaysia's 22. The results of the paper-based TOEFL are similar: Japan's average was 539, while Singapore's average score was 605, and Malaysia's 565 (<http://www.ets.org/portal/site/ets/>).

The outlook looks even worse for the majority of students who do not take the TOEFL, because of the skill-based teaching methods that have been used in schools in order to prepare them for tests, and also because of the changing economic situation. The gap between the rich and poor is widening in Japan, and fewer families will be able to afford foreign travel or Japanese universities for their children or cram schools. Here are the signs of trouble:

- The number of financially disadvantaged families who receive an allowance for dependent children is increasing (<http://finalrich.com/sos/sos-index.html>). The number is now one million families. Since the year 2000, 300,000 more families have been forced to receive an allowance to help raise their children (<http://finalrich.com/sos/sos-education-school-support.html>).
- 75% of colleges and universities in Japan are private institutions, and the average tuition per semester is as expensive (US\$3747) as tuition in colleges in the United States (\$4587) where their private schools make up only 30% of all the colleges and universities (<http://finalrich.com/sos/sos-education-world-help-loss.html>).
- According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Working Report 22, Japan's poverty rate has risen from 11% in 1980 to 15.3%, which is now well above the average for OECD countries. ([http://www.oecd.org/document/38/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_34321\\_37130854\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/38/0,3343,en_2649_34321_37130854_1_1_1_1,00.html)).
- In one prefecture in Japan one out of three junior high school children is receiving financial aid to go to school. This number has more than doubled in the last ten years (<http://finalrich.com/sos/sos-education-school-support.html>).
- The Japanese government spends only 4.1% of its Gross Domestic Product on education, compared to Denmark's 8.4% (<http://finalrich.com/sos/sos-education-world-help-loss.html>).

### **Methods with Evidence of Practical Effects**

With these facts in mind, it is more important than ever that schools in Japan use methods that are effective and efficient. Unfortunately, in Japan (and of course elsewhere) most texts and methods have no basis in research or theory. We no longer have the luxury of wasting time and resources. We must pay close attention to what methods really work in school, and not use methods only because they are new or popular, or because the ministry of education recommended it, or because publishers provided an

examination copy of the book, or because a famous college professor has developed it.

### **The Objective**

The goal of language programs in school is for students to reach the high intermediate level, to have enough competence so that they can understand at least some authentic language and thereby continue to improve on their own. This means a paper-based TOEFL of 500 to 530 (<http://www.ryugakugo.com/australia-study-info/basic-info/english-levels.htm>), considered the minimum level required to start the study at an English-speaking university, which entails a vocabulary size of about 5000 to 6000 words. This should be attainable by 80% of students by the time they graduate from college, and it might be possible to eventually reach this goal by the end of high school, but not if we keep using the current methodology.

### **The key to better results**

The missing element is the use of stories combined with self-selected reading. Listening to stories is obviously the first step to literacy, and it has been reported to be effective for language development and for encouraging an interest in reading (Elley, 1989; Vivas, 1996; Wang & Lee, 2007). In self-selected reading programs, students are free to choose any books they like under the supervision and guidance of an experienced teacher (Mason, 2006a). Self-selected reading encourages pleasure reading, and includes very little accountability, which is different from extensive reading programs with supplementary activities both before and after reading.

When reading is combined with output activities such as comprehension questions, vocabulary exercises, writing assignments, and speaking practice, students go back to the traditional mode, and reading is no longer fun. When reading is not pleasurable, it has little impact on language acquisition. Supplementary activities result in a repetition of the same pedagogical mistakes made when extensive reading failed in the past (Matsumura, 1984).

### **Effects and Efficiency**

The effectiveness of self-selected reading has been demonstrated over and over (Krashen, 2009). My focus has been the question of whether self-selected reading and listening to stories are efficient, an issue first raised by scholars (Swain, 1985; Long & Robinson, 1998) who claimed that comprehensible input in general was not efficient and needed to be supplemented with forced output activities.

The results of my research, however, show that in vocabulary, grammar, and writing, the comprehension-based approach is far more efficient than either traditional or eclectic methods (Mason, 2004; Mason & Krashen, 2004; Mason, 2006b; Mason, 2007; Mason, Vanata, Yander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009).

## Studies

The following are five studies investigating the effects and the efficiency of comprehension-based methods. The subjects in these five studies were all from different departments in different years. Despite different contexts and different protocols, studies show marked similarity in terms of results.

### 1. Mason (2004). The effect of adding supplementary writing to an extensive reading program

This study investigated whether adding supplementary writing to an extensive reading program would increase its effectiveness for the development of grammatical accuracy. The participants were Japanese female college learners of English ( $N = 104$ ) studying in an extensive reading program.

The Japanese summary group ( $n = 34$ ) wrote summaries in Japanese, the English summary group ( $n = 34$ ) wrote summaries in English, and the Correction group ( $n = 36$ ) wrote summaries in English, received corrective feedback, and rewrote their corrected summaries. All participants read an average of 2300 pages (about 500,000 words) in three semesters, and the Correction group's summaries were corrected 25 times.

The results revealed that all three groups improved significantly, and there were no statistically significant differences among the groups on three tests, grammatical accuracy, reading comprehension, and a cloze test. The questionnaire revealed that the Japanese summary group spent about 150 hours reading while the other groups spent about 300 hours reading, writing and rewriting. The conclusion was that adding supplementary writing did not lead to greater accuracy and that it was therefore inefficient. A one-way ANOVA showed no statistically significant differences among the groups,  $F(2,101) = 1.58$ ,  $p = .21$  on the number of error free clauses per 100 words on the pretest. A tests (pretest/posttest) by groups (three levels) repeated-measures ANOVA showed that there was a statistically significant difference within the participants ( $p = .00$ ), but no statistically significant difference among the groups ( $p = .05$ ). All groups improved to the same degree. Table 1 presents the effect sizes between the groups. Note that the group that wrote in Japanese was superior to all other groups in five out of six comparisons. (A plus sign indicates that the first group of each pair was superior.)

**Table 1. Effect Sizes**

	Comparison Pairs		
Test	JSG:ESG	ESG: Correction	JSG: Correction
Cloze	+ 0.12	- 0.02	+ 0.15
Reading/TOEIC	+ 0.10	- 0.17	- 0.08
Error Free Clauses	+ 0.39	0.00	+ 0.39

JSG= Japanese summary group, ESG = English summary group, Correction = English Summary plus Correction

### 2. Mason & Krashen (2004). Is Form-Focused Vocabulary Instruction Worth While?

Hearing stories can result in considerable incidental vocabulary development, for both first and second language acquisition (e.g. Elley, 1992; Robbins and Ehri, 1994; Senechal, LeFevre, Hudson

& Lawon, 1996). It has also been claimed, however, that direct instruction is more effective than incidental vocabulary acquisition and that combining both approaches will be more effective than incidental acquisition alone (Coady, 1997). In this study, we compared vocabulary growth in English as a foreign language through hearing a story with a combination of a story and supplementary activities designed to focus students specifically on learning the new words in the story. Subjects were first year Japanese female students at a junior college in Osaka. One class was the "story-only" group and the other was the "story-plus-study" group. The story-only group spent only 15 minutes listening to a story. The story-plus-study group spent nearly the entire class hour (85 minutes) listening to the story and doing supplementary activities. Calculations of words learned per minute revealed that the story-only group learned words more efficiently. The results suggest that additional focus on form in the form of traditional vocabulary exercises is not as efficient as hearing words in the context of stories. The Table 2 presents the efficiency of vocabulary acquisition.

**Table 2. Efficiency (words learned per minute)**

	1 <sup>st</sup> posttest	2 <sup>nd</sup> posttest	delayed posttest
Story Only	.62	—	.25
Story Plus Study	.42	.23	.16

Delayed posttest = 5 weeks later.

More time on task produced better results, but when time spent was considered, story-listening alone was more efficient. The results predict that more time on story-listening will produce far better results.

### **3. Mason (2006b). Free Voluntary Reading and Autonomy in Second Language Acquisition: Improving TOEFL Scores from Reading Alone**

As noted earlier, it is reasonable to propose that a goal of language programs is to make students "autonomous," that is, able to improve their competence in their second language on their own. An obvious way to do this is to introduce students to free voluntary reading, a pleasurable activity that students can certainly do on their own, and that has been shown to have powerful payoffs in increased proficiency in all aspects of literacy (Krashen, 2004). This paper reports an attempt to do this: Students who had completed classes in which they were involved in self-selected reading of graded readers were encouraged to continue reading on their own in preparation for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Previous research strongly suggests that reading is good preparation for the TOEFL. One case study (Constantino, 1995) and two multivariate correlational studies (Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Constantino, SY Lee, KS Cho, and Krashen, 1997) have shown that the amount of recreational reading students do is a strong predictor of TOEFL performance.

Showing that just engaging in independent reading improves scores on the TOEFL examination would have strong implications for both theory and practice. On the level of theory, it would confirm that

language acquisition is possible from comprehensible input (in this case reading) alone. On the level of practice, it would tell us whether independent study is a viable and practical means of preparing for the TOEFL examination, especially if we can compare students' progress with those who prepare for the TOEFL examination in more traditional ways (Swinton, 1983).

Table 3 presents gains made by each subject for each component of the TOEFL, as well as weeks spent reading and the average gain per week. The average gain per student was 3.5 points per week, which is about the same as gains students make in TOEFL preparation courses.

**Table 3. *Gains made by students***

Name	Test date	Listening	Grammar	Reading	Total	Gain	Weeks	Pts/Wk
N	1/17/01	51	44	41	453			
	4/6/01	51	52	47	500	47	11	4.2
S	1/22/03	46	44	42	440			
	4/5/03	50	49	44	477	37	10	3.7
Y	7/12/03	44	45	48	457			
	8/6/03	46	49	50	477	20	3.5	5.7
U	7/12/03	46	51	47	480			
	10/25/03	49	50	55	513	33	15	2.2
Yu	7/12/03	44	42	46	440			
	10/25/03	46	44	51	470	30	15	2.0
K	3/31/05	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	467			
	6/10/05	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	500	33	10	3.3

n.a. = not available

The subjects in this study were well-educated, experienced language students, were highly motivated, and volunteered to engage in the reading program. It is thus inappropriate to generalize these results to all language students. The results of this study confirm, however, that it is possible to improve in a second language from input/reading alone, and that the benefits of reading extend to vocabulary and grammar. The results also suggest that at least some students can prepare quite well for the TOEFL in their own country. Finally, the results suggest that the courses these students took succeeded in making them autonomous language acquirers. To confirm that this is so, we need to investigate whether these students turn to reading on their own in the future to improve their English.

#### **4. Mason (2007). The Efficiency of Self-Selected Reading and Hearing Stories on Adult Second Language Acquisition**

Two groups of Japanese college students in Japan participated in an extensive reading class in which they listened to a folk tale for 30 to 40 minutes in English told by the teacher and read graded readers at home. One group consisted of English majors who took six other English classes using a form-based

approach, and the other consisted of Health Science majors who took no other English classes. Both groups improved, but Health Science students' gains per hour of class-time were far greater; they were, in other words, more efficient. Table 4 presents improvements in accuracy as the ratio of error-free phrases to total phrases written. Again, the English majors made larger gains, but were less efficient.

**Table 4. *Percentage of error-free phrases***

	Pre-test	Post-test	gain	efficiency
English	47% (9.8/20.9)	55% (28.2/51.6)	8%	.06 (8/126)
Health Science	35% (6.2/17.6)	40% (13/32.9)	5%	.28 (5/ 18)

#### **5. Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, (2009). The Effects and Efficiency of Hearing Stories on Vocabulary Acquisition by Students of German as a Second Foreign Language in Japan**

The first experiment of the three included in this paper showed that hearing a story resulted in a higher acquisition/learning rate than the list method for beginning students of German as a foreign language. The second and third experiments showed that supplementary focus on form activities were not worthwhile for vocabulary acquisition/learning. Table 5 presents that the rate of acquisition/learning was .10 words per minute from listening to stories, about six words per hour. (In contrast, students learn 2.4 words per hour in traditional classes.)

**Table 5. *Mean and S.D. of Pre-, Post-, and Delayed post-test (from experiment 3)***

Pretest Mean (S.D.)	Posttest Mean (S.D.)	Gain	Delayed Mean (S.D.) (4~7 wks Later)	Final Gain	Time Spent	Rate: Word/min.
10.7 (5.3)	39.2 (7.3)	28.5 (58%)	16.7 (7.2)	6 (12%)	60 min.	.10

Let us assume 3500 minutes of English in junior high school, consisting of two 50-minute classes per week for 35 weeks. If the .10 per minute rate holds for beginning English as well as German, students will acquire/learn about 350 words in the first year. Data from other studies (Mason and Krashen, 2004) indicates that the rate gets better as students improve, with a rate of .25 words per minute in the last year of high school, resulting in about 875 words per year. Students will thus reach the goal of 5000 to 6000 words in English in eight years of schooling using comprehensible-input based methodology.

#### **Summary and Conclusion**

Although more people speak Chinese (around 874,000,000) as a native language, English (about 341,000,000 native speakers) is far more world-wide in its distribution than all other spoken languages. It is an official language in 52 countries as well as in many small colonies and territories. In addition, 1/4 to 1/3 of the people in the world understand and speak English to some degree. In 2001, out of the 189

member countries in the United Nations, more than 120 chose to use English for communication with embassies from other countries. English is also the dominant language in electronic communication, particularly on the Internet. ([http://anthro.palomar.edu/language/language\\_1.htm](http://anthro.palomar.edu/language/language_1.htm)).

Unless language teaching methodologies change, young Japanese people whose English abilities are very low will be left behind in the world affairs while young people with high English proficiency in other countries will be capable of seizing the opportunities. Education in Japan is expensive, and the economic gap between the rich and the poor is widening rapidly. In order to catch up with the world standard in English proficiency Japan needs to have a complete change in English language education. The methodology must be both time- and cost-efficient.

Comprehension-based methods, such as reading books and listening to stories, should at least be considered for language pedagogy in Japan. The research cited here and elsewhere strongly suggest that with a comprehension-based approach, EFL students will acquire vocabulary as quickly as native speakers do, and also become good readers, which will help them obtain high scores on the TOEFL.

There has never been a language acquisition approach that has been validated to this extent both qualitatively and quantitatively, not only for its efficacy but also its efficiency (Krashen, 2003). The comprehension-based methodology appears to be the solution to the current problem in English education in Asia, including Japan.

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