

A Pure Comprehension Approach: More Effective and Efficient than Eclectic Second Language Teaching?

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For the last twenty years the question that I have been interested in is whether a method that is based on the strong version of the Input Hypothesis is possible, and if so, whether it is both more effective and efficient than the combination of implicit and explicit methods, i.e., an eclectic approach.

The strong version of the Input Hypothesis states that input is both necessary and sufficient for language acquisition.

There is no longer any doubt that comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition, but, many still believe that input alone is insufficient, and therefore adding conscious learning of language to input-based methods will accelerate progress. It is also assumed that consciously learned linguistic knowledge can be converted into subconscious competence.

Whether the input-based method is more effective than skill-based methods is also a settled issue (Krashen, 2003, 2004, 2011). The question that still remains is whether methodology based on the strong version of the Input Hypothesis is superior to the Eclectic approach – the combination of skill-based and input-based methods.

Let me remind you what the Eclectic Approach is. The British Council explains the eclectic approach as follows:

“In the move away from teachers following one specific methodology, the eclectic approach is the label given to a teacher's use of techniques and activities from a range of language teaching approaches and methodologies. The teacher decides what methodology or approach to use depending on the aims of the lesson and the learners in the group. Almost all modern course books have a mixture of approaches and methodologies... The class starts with an inductive activity with learners identifying the different uses of synonyms of movement using a reading text. They then practice these using TPR. In another class, the input is recycled through a task-based lesson, with learners producing the instructions for an exercise manual... A typical lesson might combine elements from various sources such as TPR and TBL, the communicative approach, e.g. in communication gap activities; the lexical approach, e.g. focusing on lexical chunks in reading; and the structural-situational approach, e.g. establishing a clear context for the presentation of new structures.”

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/eclectic-approach>

The activities mentioned in this short paragraph are derived from:

1) TPR (Total Physical Response); 2) TBL (Task Based Learning); 3) the communicative approach (speaking); 4) the lexical approach (vocabulary); and 5) the structural-situational approach (grammar).

This is what almost every Japanese EFL student in Japan has been exposed to for the last 30 to 40 years. But standardized tests from TOEIC and TOEFL show that students in Japan score much lower than the international average, which suggests that the eclectic approach is not working very well.

Recently, there was news of an unbelievable achievement of a 12 year old Japanese girl scoring almost perfectly on the TOEIC. She read an estimated 10,000 books in English (<https://ameblo.jp/eigo-no-tatsujin/entry-12264692533.html>) beginning when she was just three years old. Another amazing example is that of one of my former students, “Miyako,” who scored 975 on the TOEIC from reading alone (Mason, 2017).

Reading has been reported to be the most efficient way to receive comprehensible input (Nation, 2014). It is estimated that those who already have a vocabulary size of 2000 word families can acquire 7000 more word-families from reading 1233 hours (Nation, 2014). That is less than four years when one reads one hour a day. Our case studies have confirmed Nation’s estimate: One hour of reading a day will result in a gain of 200 points on the TOEIC in one year (Krashen & Mason, 2015; Mason & Krashen, 2017).

Research also shows that comprehension-based instruction is superior to traditional instruction (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Cho & Choi, 2008; Elley, 1989; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2011; Lee, 2006; Lee, 2007; Mason & Krashen, 1997, 2004; Mason, 2006, 2013; Smith, 2006; Wang & Lee, 2007). Incidental vocabulary acquisition, once regarded as impossible in the classroom situation, was not only found to be possible but was reported to be rapid, with a rate of .175 words acquired per minute (wpm) from reading (Dupuy and Krashen, 1993). Rates from .10 to .25 wpm, close to the rate estimated for native speakers (Nagy, Herman & Anderson, 1985), were reported in Mason, 2005, Mason and Krashen, 2004, Mason, et. al., 2009.

In this paper, I add several more results to the previous findings reported in Mason, 2007, which was data gathered from different groups of students at Shitennoji University and its Junior College from students registered for a comprehension-based English class as a required course.

PROCEDURE

Participants

Three groups of participants participated in this study: 1) first-year female students in the English department at the junior college, referred to as “English majors,” 2) second year

students, mostly male, in the humanities department at the university; and 3) first-year female students in the Home Economics department, Health Science department, and Preschool Education department at the junior college. The data was taken both from tests administered in the first and second semesters from the years 2006 to 2008. Some results from the English majors and the Health Science majors were reported in Mason (2007). This report adds new data from the Preschool Education majors from the years 2006, 2007, and 2008, the Home Economics majors from 2007 and 2008, and the Humanities majors in the year of 2006.

The English majors had seven English classes per week. Six out of the seven classes were skill-based, and one was comprehension-based. The Humanities majors had two classes per week, and one was skill-based while the other was comprehension-based. The junior college groups (Home Economics, Health Science, and Pre School Education) all had only one class per week and the class was 100% comprehension-based. The same procedure was repeated for three years with different groups.

The students in the English department had to purchase expensive imported textbooks and audiotapes each semester for their skills-based classes, while there was no textbook used in the comprehension-based class. The students in the comprehension-based class read books from the library and listened to stories told by the teacher.

The differences among these classes were that the junior college English majors spent a great deal of money and time on their English studies, but the non-English major students in the junior college spent much less time in English lessons and no money on textbooks.

Table 1: Description of Subjects - Majors

Group	Skill-based	Comp-based
English (Junior College Students)	6	1
Humanities (University students)	1	1
Home Ec. / Health Science /Pre School Ed (Junior College Students)	0	1

Treatment

All groups received comprehension-based instruction once a week. This class lasted 90 minutes each week. Class-time was mainly devoted to listening to stories, during which students were focused on the meaning of the story.

They listened to stories from the Grimm Brothers' Household Tales or other folktales from different countries. Students listened to the story and were asked to write about the story as they understood it in Japanese. The written summary was submitted to the teacher and was used for formative assessment.

The auditory input was made more comprehensible largely through the use of supplementation in the form of pictures drawn by the teacher on a large blackboard. New words were also written on the board and were introduced using already known words

(synonyms) and antonyms or explained with suffixes and prefixes. Occasionally, a Japanese translation was provided. Other kinds of supplementation used to make stories more comprehensible included gestures, body movements, facial expressions, slow and clear speech, simplified content, less complex syntax, and occasional explanation of points of grammar.

The students were told that the purpose of the lesson was only to understand the story and not to memorize vocabulary.

Class time was also set aside for book reading. Roughly 70 books from *Oxford Reading Tree Series* were kept in the cabinet in the classroom and when the students did not bring a book with them to class, those books were available for them to read.

Students were advised to start with wordless books, but, on the same day, students moved onto books with words.

For homework, students engaged in Guided Self-Selected Reading: Books were arranged according to levels and interest, and students were free to choose from the collection of books that the teacher provided.

At the beginning of the term, students were asked to read 50 to 60 pages from these graded readers per week. Ten 200-word Penguin graded readers, or four to six easy Macmillan 600-word graded readers (such as “Anna and the Fighter”) per week were recommended for reading. Students were asked to keep a record of the books they read, including the title, publisher, level of the graded readers, pages read (excluding illustration and picture pages), the time they spent reading, and a brief summary of the book in their first language (Japanese).

Students also had access to a wide variety of graded readers from the university library.

Examination of their reading logs showed that subjects mostly read books from the 200-word level (200-word level graded readers are designed to be understood by readers who know only the 200 highest frequency words) but some read books that were not suggested in the course, including books below the 200-word level. About one-third of the students reported that even the 200-word level graded readers were difficult to read. There was a wide difference among the students in proficiency. This difference was confirmed by their pretest scores (see results section).

In the skill-based classes, English Majors had six hours of instruction per week in English, using Self-Access Pair Learning, a method in which students work in pairs using a textbook and audiotape. This method was developed in the late 1970’s in Switzerland (Ferguson, 1973). The approach consists of listening, speaking, pronunciation, writing and reading, with teacher intervention taking place only when there is a problem (Ross, 1992, p. 171). Even though Self-Access Pair Learning is not a teacher-fronted method, it has been shown to heavily emphasize form (Ross, 1992).

Measures

A 100-item cloze test was used as the pre-test and the post-test. The passage was written at the 6th grade reading level and had approximately 1600 words with every 10th word deleted at most places. Subjects received full credit if their answers were grammatically and semantically correct, and full credit was also given where there were mild spelling errors that did not influence the interpretation of the answer. The test-retest reliability of this measure is .87 (Mason, 2003).

The subjects also took a writing test at the beginning and end of each semester. The format for the both pre-test and post-test was the same: The students were asked to read a story from a beginning level graded reader (600-word level, less than 2000 words in length) and write a summary of the story without looking at the text in English.

Two different stories at the same graded reader level were used for the tests. The investigator totaled the number of the words written in each essay, the number of phrases, and the number of error-free phrases.

For the second semester a short story from the elementary level graded reader (Macmillan 1100-word level. Less than 2000 words in length in the short story) was used as a prompt, and two separate stories were used for the pre-test and the post-test.

The third measurement was based on Nation's Vocabulary Levels Test (1990), 2000 and 3000-word levels. There are four versions at each level and each version has 18 items on the test.

A revised version of the Nation 2000-word level test was used, a combined version with 54 items (Hunt and Beglar, 1999). A 57-item version of the 3000-word level test was constructed, based on item analysis obtained from administering the test to over 500 students in several universities throughout the Osaka area. The time between the pre-test and the posttest was 12 weeks.

RESULTS

Results: Cloze test

Table 2 presents the results for the cloze test given at the beginning and the end of the first semester. English majors started at 22.2, and gained 6.4 points, the Health Science majors started at 15.2 and gained 6.9 points, the Preschool Education majors started at 17.9 and 17.7 points and gained 4.9 and 4.2 points.

Analyzed separately is a group of Preschool Education students who reported reading over 500 pages during the semester ("Better readers in Preschool"). They started at 20.6 and gained 11.7 points.

Table2. Cloze Test Results

Group	Pre-Cloze	Post Cloze	Cloze Gain
English (N = 44)	22.2 (8.5)	28.6 (8.9)	6.4
Health Science 2007 (N = 52)	15.2 (7.5)	22.1 (8.9)	6.9
Preschool Ed 2007 (N = 107)	17.9 (9.9)	22.8 (10.7)	4.9
Preschool Ed 2008 (N =114)	17.7 (10.4)	21.9 (11.7)	4.2
Better Readers in Preschool Ed 2008 (n = 38)	20.6 (10.7)	32.3 (12.5)	11.7

English majors spent 126 hours in class per semester. Others spent only 18 hours in class per semester

A more accurate way to compare the results is to consider efficiency, gains per hour of instruction. The English majors had much more instruction. Recall that they were taking seven hours of English per week, while the Preschool Education majors had only one English class per week. The English majors spent 126 hours in class during the semester (10.5 hours x 12 weeks) and gained 6.4 points on the cloze test. They thus gained 0.05 points per hour of class time (See Table 3).

Table 3. Efficiency

Group	Efficiency
English (N = 44)	0.05
Health Science (N = 52)	0.38
Preschool 2007 (N = 107)	0.27
Preschool 2008 (N =114)	0.23
Better Readers in Preschool Education 2008 (n =38)	0.65

Non-English majors spent 18 hours in class and gained 4.2 to 11.7 points. This means they gained 0.2 to 0.7 points per hour. (Note that only class-time was included in the analysis. Homework was not included, but the non-English majors did not report reading more than the English majors).

Results: Writing Fluency

All groups gained in writing fluency (Table 4). When efficiency was considered, the Non-English Major students did much better, gaining at three to four times the rate in terms of words written per hour of instruction in the first semester and three times as much in the second semester (Table 5).

English majors had 7 class per week (one SL and reading and six skill-based lessons per week). University students had one class of SL with reading, and the other was a grammar-based intensive reading lesson. Both Home Economics and Preschool Education majors had only one class of SL with reading at home.

Table 4. Fluency Efficiency First Semester

Group	Pre- Total Words	Post- Total Words	Gain	Efficiency
English 2006 (N = 20)	66.3 (33.0)	203.1 (49.8)	136.8	1.10
English 2007 (Spring N =37)	91.2 (56.0)	203.2 (85.6)	112.0	0.89
University 2006 (N = 28)	45.8 (31.0)	149.7 (61.5)	103.9	2.89
Home Ec 2006 (N =13)	38.2 (32.8)	134.5(59.6)	96.3	5.30
Preschool Ed 2006 (N =34)	71.1 (40.5)	153.5 (58.1)	82.4	4.58
Preschool 2007 (N =107)	97.1 (54.9)	163.1 (61.9)	66.0	3.70
Preschool 2008 (N =114)	71.4 (65.3)	143.0 (93.3)	71.6	4.00

Table 5. Fluency Efficiency Second Semester

Group	Pre- Total Words	Post Total Words	Gain	Efficiency
English 2007 (N = 29)	97.5 (55.5)	200.1 (76.8)	102.6	0.81
University 2006 (N = 22)	75.2 (49.6)	131.3 (39.9)	56.1	1.56
Preschool Ed 2008 (N = 114)	73.0 (55.6)	104.1 (60.3)	31.1	1.73
Pre Ed Better Readers 2008 (n = 23)	82.5 (59.8)	139.9 (62.4)	57.4	3.19

Results: Grammatical Accuracy in Writing

Grammatical accuracy was determined by an analysis of Error Free Phrases. (Mason, 2003). Not only was Non-English majors' accuracy gain in the first semester significantly greater than that of the English majors, they were four to eight times as efficient. (Table 6).

Table 6. Accuracy Efficiency First Semester

Group	EFP Pre	EFP post	Gain	Efficiency
English (n =32)	4.7 (3.3)	17.6 (9.5)	12.9	0.10
University (n =26)	3.2 (2.9)	16.9 (7.1)	13.7	0.38
Home Economics (n =13)	1.0 (2.6)	16.2 (8.6)	15.2	0.84

Results: Vocabulary

Table 7 demonstrates that the non-English majors' gain on vocabulary was greater than the English majors' gain.

Table 7. Vocabulary Gain of English and Preschool Education Majors

	2000 Level Test (54 items)			3000 Level Test (57 items)		
	Pre	Post	Gain	Pre	Post	Gain
English 2007 (n = 29)	23.3 (8.3)	27.1 (10.8)	3.8	23.1 (8.2)	23.5 (12.1)	0.4
Preschool 2007 (n = 107)	23.3 (9.9)	28.6 (9.5)	5.3	20.1 (7.3)	22.5 (8.1)	2.4

CONCLUSION

The experiments described in this report compared two approaches: The Eclectic Approach, a combination of both input and skill-based approaches, and the Comprehension-based Approach.

There is a fundamental difference between these two approaches. The Comprehension-based Approach takes the position that input is both necessary and sufficient for language acquisition. In contrast, the Eclectic Approach takes the position that the Skill-based Approach is necessary in that although it acknowledges the importance of comprehensible input, it denies that input alone is sufficient.

Students from different departments from different years participated in this study. The result showed the superiority of the Comprehension-based Approach over the Eclectic Approach. The non-English majors who spent no money on textbooks and devoted less time to English study did significantly better than the English majors who spent money on expensive textbooks and devoted seven times as much time to English classes. This result is consistent with previous studies that examined the efficiency of the Comprehension-based Approach (Mason, 2003, 2007, 2011, Mason and Krashen, 1997, 2004, Mason, et al. 2009).

An interesting discovery was that those groups from Junior College whose competence in English were much lower than the English majors improved as much as the English majors or better with the Comprehension-based methods, and their efficiency was much better than the English majors. This result is very similar to the findings in Elley (1989) who reported that the weak students improved as much as the strong students on vocabulary acquisition from hearing stories.

Also, the better readers from the Preschool Education improved the most on the cloze test, a test of general competency, and showed the most improvement on writing fluency. These students had only one Story Listening lesson per week and read over 500 pages per semester.

The methods used in the Comprehension-based Approach were Story Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading. They are the methods which were developed to align with the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985). Supplementation was used to make input more comprehensible. It was not direct instruction on form.

The results of these studies and the results from previous studies thus suggest that Comprehension-based instruction is both more effective and efficient than the combination of comprehension-based and skill-based instruction.

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