

Hypothesis: A Class Supplying Rich Comprehensible Input is More Effective and Efficient than “Immersion”

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Abstract: An acquirer of English as a foreign language had experiences in EFL classes that aimed to supply rich, interesting aural and written comprehensible input, traditional classes, and living in an English-speaking country. Her scores on the TOEIC examination support the hypothesis that the input-oriented classes were more effective and efficient, resulting in greater gains and more rapid gains.

Conventional wisdom says that in order to acquire a second language you need to go to the country where the language is spoken or live in an environment where you are using the language. The case history presented here questions this “immersion assumption.” Sawako, a native speaker of Japanese, clearly did better attending a special class that provided rich, comprehensible, and interesting input (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985, 2003, 2004, 2011) than she did working or even studying in an environment where English is used.

We describe Sawako’s experiences, covering six phases of her linguistic path since 1993, when she entered a college in Japan as an English major. For each phase, when possible, we included her scores on the TOEIC examination, taken at the beginning and end of each phase.

PHASE ONE: 1993-1995: Junior college, Story Listening/Reading classes, 320-point gain. 330-650

In 1993 Sawako scored 330 on the TOEIC examination when she first began to study at a junior college in Japan as an English major. Over the next two years, she improved her score to 650, a remarkable 320-point gain. During these two years, she took four semesters (beginning and intermediate level) of a class that combined Story Listening ⁽¹⁾ and Guided Self-Selected Reading (about 72 hours in class), and according to Sawako, she read on her own for 200 hours. She also took traditional English classes as well, resulting in a total of 500 hours of instruction in English.

Sawako lived in an English-speaking country in a home-stay environment for four weeks during the spring break (from mid-February to mid-March) between her two years of junior college.

As we shall see, we have reason to hypothesize that it was the rich comprehensible input provided in the Story Listening/pleasure reading class and her own reading that was primarily responsible for her 320-point gain.

PHASE TWO: 1995 - March 2001: English on the job. 650-830

After finishing junior college, Sawako took a job in Japan in which she used some English “on and off” until 2001. She also attended a conversation class at a private English school once or twice a week for two years, a total of 80 hours, attended a TOEIC preparation course once a week for two months for one hour each session (a total of eight hours) and studied grammar and vocabulary from a TOEFL preparation textbook. She spent about 80 minutes a week watching Disney movies in English without Japanese subtitles (400 hours) at home. During these six years she read only eight books (a total of 932 pages) but read each of them three times (2796 pages).

Table 1. Books Read 1995 to 2001

Title	Publisher	Level	Pages
1. Stories from Shakespeare	Longman Classics	Graded reader Stage 3:1300 Head words	64
2. One Day at Horror Land	Scholastic	R.L. Stine, Goosebumps series	123
3. Welcome to Dead House	Scholastic	R.L. Stine, Goosebumps series	126
4. Say Cheese and Die!	Scholastic	R.L. Stine, Goosebumps series	136
5. A Night in Terror Tower	Scholastic	R.L. Stine, Goosebumps series	29
6. Ghost Beach	Scholastic	R.L. Stine, Goosebumps series	119
7. The Scarecrow Walks at Midnight	Scholastic	R.L. Stine, Goosebumps series	122
8. The Vampire in Love	Pocket Books	A Minstrel Book	113

In April 2001, she took the TOEIC test again, scoring 830: a 180-point gain over the 650 score she received after finishing junior college in 1995, a gain of about 30 points a year, nowhere near what she accomplished while a student at the junior college. Students in the Story Listening/Reading classes typically read about 1000 pages a semester and gained about 50 points on the TOEIC. This suggests that Sawako’s first reading of the eight books was responsible for her gains during this phase.

PHASE THREE: April 2001 to June 2002: Sawako in Canada. 830-835

Phrase 3A. April 2001 to July 2001: Sawako enrolled in an ESL program in British Columbia, Canada, and stayed with a host family. She had regular conversations with members of the family but did not read books during this time.

Phase 3B. September 2001 to June 2002 (two semesters): Sawako took classes in Applied Business Technology Program at Northern Lights College in British Columbia. She did no pleasure reading, and only read textbooks in connection with her business classes.

She gained only five points on the TOEIC during this time, a little over one year.

PHASE FOUR: June 2002 to 2015: in Japan. 835-830

Sawako reported that she read in English “on and off” during this time. She declined five points on the TOEIC between 2002 and 2015.

PHASE FIVE: 2015 to 2017: in Japan. 830-810

Sawako continued to read “on and off” between 2015 and fall, 2017.

PHASE SIX: Story Listening/Reading class, again at college, 2017 - 2018. (one semester) 810 - 895

Sawako returned to the same college she attended in 1993-1995, and attended the same class she did before, but this time she attended the advanced level class (see footnote 1). She took no other classes during this time.

Sawako took the TOEIC test in July 2017 and her score was 810. She took the test again in January 2018, after finishing the semester, and her score was 895, a gain of 85 points.

Sawako’s independent, self-selected reading during the fall semester, 2017-2018, is presented below. Except where indicated (*), all were graded readers, modified for those acquiring English as a second language.

Table 2. Books read between Mid-September 2017 to Mid-January 2018

Title	Publisher	Level	Pages
1. Beauty and the Beast	Disney Press*	Regular	250
2. Pride and Prejudice	IBC Publishing	2000	95
3. Death on the Nile	Penguin Readers	2300	80
4. The Mysterious Affair at Styles	Harper Collins Publisher*	Regular	85
5. Wuthering Heights	Macmillan Readers	1600	70
6. Bridget Jones's Diary	Macmillan Readers	1600	77
7. The Speckled Band and other stories	Macmillan Readers	1600	50
8. Rebecca	Penguin Readers	2300	100
9. Anna Karenina	Macmillan Readers	2200	91
10. Othello	Macmillan Readers	1600	65
11. Tess of the d'Urbervilles	OUP BW	2500	111
12. The Phantom of the Opera	Penguin Readers	2300	85
13. The Great Gatsby	Penguin Readers	2300	80
14. The Bride Price	OUPBW	1800	74
15. Madame Bovary	Penguin Readers	3000	98
16. Jamaica Inn	Penguin Readers	2300	115
17. Jane Eyre	Penguin Readers	2300	154
18. Sons and Lovers	Penguin Readers	2300	60

OUPBW= Oxford University Press Book Worm Series

Summary Table

Phase	Pre	Post	Gain	Duration	Description	Rate*
1	330	650	320	4 semesters	SL/reading	80/ semester
					other EFL classes	
2		830	180	6 years	self-study	30/ year
					Movies	
					TOEIC preparation course	
					8 books	
					conversation class 2 years	
3	830	835	5	13 months	ESL, 3 months	5/year
					Business classes: 2 semesters	
4		830	-5	13 years	read "on and off"	-0.384/year
5		810	-20	2 years	read "on and off"	-5/year
6	810	895	85	1 semester	SL/reading no other classes	85/semester

*Rate = points gained on TOEIC

Conclusions

1. Sawako made excellent gains when she took Story Listening/Reading classes (phases 1 and 6).
2. She also made gains in phase 2, but her rate was slow, far less efficient than when she took the classes.
3. Ordinary instruction appears to have produced modest results in phase 2. In phase 6, she made excellent gains without ordinary classes, which suggests that the SL/reading class was responsible for gains in phase 1.

Thus:

1. Improvement from taking a course that focusses on Story Listening and Reading was dramatic, similar to what has been reported in previous studies.
2. Improvement from “ordinary” use of English with some pleasure reading is much less impressive, but over the years the cumulative gains are substantial.

In other words, a class that presents rich and interesting comprehensible input and that stimulates pleasure reading can result in more efficient and greater language acquisition than ordinary English language use (Mason, 2013, 2018; Smith, 2006).

FOOTNOTE ONE: *Story Listening was introduced into this program in 1990. Story Listening presents auditory comprehensible input that will lead to reading. The teacher tells a story, anticipating difficult vocabulary and grammar and using drawings and occasional first language translation to make the story more comprehensible. The focus is not on deliberate learning; students are exposed to these words and forms many time as they encounter them in different stories, and the assumption is that they will gradually be*

acquired without conscious effort in memorizing (Mason & Krashen, 2004; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009).

In the advanced Story Listening class, there are few or no drawings or words written on the blackboard. The teacher simply tells a story. The explanation of unknown words is usually done verbally, paraphrasing with the use of known words. The students' first language is rarely used. Unlike Story Listening lessons done in the beginning and intermediate level classes where many different kinds of supplementation are used to tell and explain stories including drawings and some L1, the advanced SL lesson is similar to a story version of a lecture (www.storiesfirst.org).

At both levels, students acquire the competence and desire to read in English and are given access to a wide variety of comprehensible books. At first, book selection is guided, and eventually it is self-selected.

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