

The Immersion Assumption

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The public, as well as many language professionals, think that *immersion* is the best way to acquire a language. People assume that the chance for acquirers to interact with native speakers is the major factor conferring immersion its value. The immersion assumption can be tested by comparing immersion and immersion-type experiences to other treatments. In this study we report a case of a Japanese college student, Kenta, to explain that reading might be a better choice than immersion. He gained significantly on the TOEIC after engaging in periods of pleasure reading but gained little after periods in essentially immersive situations. This matches the experience of Sawako, a Japanese woman whose case we've previously reported (Mason & Krashen, 2019). The results are surprisingly consistent: Reading for pleasure, a form of *optimal input*, appears to be a better option for second language acquisition than immersion.

Keywords: second language acquisition, pleasure reading, immersion, efficiency, optimal input, TOEIC, story-listening

INTRODUCTION

The public, as well as many language professionals, think that *immersion*, e.g. living in a country where the second language is spoken, is the best way to acquire a language. People further assume that the chance for acquirers to interact with native speakers is the major factor conferring immersion its value.

Dabrowski (2003) asked US Air Force officers who spoke a second language how they maintained proficiency and how the air force could help them do it. The officers overwhelmingly endorsed "immersion." When asked how the Air Force could help them, 89% asked for some form of immersion (e.g. assignments abroad).

The immersion assumption can be tested by comparing immersion and immersion-type experiences to other treatments.

Sawako

One such test of the value of immersion involved a single subject, Sawako (Mason & Krashen, 2019). Sawako was a native speaker of Japanese and a high intermediate speaker of English (TOEIC = 830). She then spent over a year in Canada (2/2001 to 6/2002) in what many would describe as an ideal language immersion environment. During part of this time she lived with a host family and engaged in conversations in English regularly, took an ESL class, subsequently took college classes in business technology that were taught in English, and worked in a job that required her to speak English. She reported that she did no pleasure reading

during this time; she only read textbooks for her classes. She gained only five points on the TOEIC (830-835) in a little over one year.

Some years later, after experiencing a 25point drop in her TOEIC score, she enrolled in a Story Listening/Reading English as a foreign language (EFL) class (Mason, 2019) in Japan for one semester (2017-2018). She read 1740 pages of comprehensible English books, mostly graded readers, as part of the program. Her TOEIC score improved 85 points (810 to 895).

Thus, although she appeared to have had an ideal immersion experience, with social interaction, work experience and a course in which the language used was English, she did not make impressive progress, and gained much more from a class taken in her home country that included listening to stories and self-selected reading.

The study we here present on Kenta, another Japanese EFL learner, replicates those results.

Kenta

Kenta was a university student in Japan majoring in international business who took EFL classes at the university. His experiences and progress can be divided into five periods.

Period 1. April 2011 (TOEIC = 295) to Summer 2011 (TOEIC= 310)

Kenta began his university studies in April 2011. His TOEIC score at this time was 295. He took five EFL classes in the first semester. Three of these were communication courses focusing on conversing with a native speaker, and the other two were reading classes. The semester lasted 15 weeks. After the semester was over, he took the TOEIC and scored 310, a 15-point gain over the 15-week semester. During the summer vacation, he traveled around Australia for three weeks.

Period 2. Summer 2011 (TOEIC= 310) to October 2012 (TOEIC=615)

In his third semester at the university, Kenta took a Story Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading (SL/GSSR; aka collectively as SL) class, beginning in April 2012. It included listening to stories and reading graded readers outside of class. During the summer he went to the Philippines for three weeks and attended a traditional language school. He took the TOEIC test in the middle of the second semester in October. His TOEIC score increased 305 points in a little over a year.

Period 3. October 2012 (TOEIC=615) to January 2013 (TOEIC=625)

Although the SL/GSSR class officially continued until January 2013, Kenta lost interest in reading beginning in November and was more interested in interacting with native speakers. He became a regular lunchtime visitor to iTALK PLAZA, a program on campus where English students could converse informally with English instructors who were assigned to keep hours there. He did little reading after he took the TOEIC test in October 2012, gaining only 10 points in three months.

Period 4. January 2013 (TOEIC=625) to January 2014 (TOEIC=625)

Kenta continued attending conversation sessions at iTALK at lunch and during his free time on campus, and had two immersion experiences: During spring vacation, in February and March, he attended a traditional language school in the Philippines for six weeks and during the summer he went to another traditional language school in Seattle in the USA for four weeks. He expected a huge gain when he took the TOEIC again in January 2014: He had been interacting with native speakers of English at iTALK and had attended ten weeks of classes abroad. His TOEIC score in January, however, was a disappointing 625: No gain after two semesters.

Period 5. January 2014 (TOEIC=625) to November 2014 (TOEIC=795)

Here in his last year at the university, Kenta decided to return to self-selected reading. He had been introduced to the research findings showing that reading was strongly related to gains on the TOEIC (Mason, 2011, 2013a, 2013b) and TOEFL (Constantino, 1995; Constantino, Cho, Lee and Krashen, 1995, Mason, 2006). He decided to use the Self-Selected Reading method (Krashen, 2004) that he had been introduced to when he was a second-year student (Period 2). In

addition, he attended a Story Listening class taught by B.M. twice a week to hear stories (Mason & Krashen, 2020).

During the eight-week spring break (February and March 2014), he read 2973 pages. The books he read and the number of pages in each are listed in Appendix A.

In April he began to read the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* series, which he found comprehensible and enjoyable.

During the summer he went to Europe to participate in a volunteer program in the Czech Republic. He took the TOEIC for the last time and his score was 795. His total reading for period 5 was 6475 pages, 2973 in February and March and 3502 starting in April.

We compare now the periods during which Kenta made the greatest gains with those in which there was no or very little improvement.

Kenta made the greatest gains in periods 2 and 5 - the periods in which he did the most reading. He made only small gains or no gains at all during periods in which he did little or no reading, but instead took traditional classes, attended conversation sessions, or traveled in other countries where English was spoken (Periods 1, 3, 4).

As Kenta now looks back over his experience, he sees the relationships as obvious, but was unaware of them until he reached Period 5. He is, of course, now convinced of the power of reading: He told B.M., "Right now, there are many English books in my room. I keep buying picture books for my baby nephew who lives with us in the same house ...".

The case of Kenta is similar to Sawako's: significant progress with Story-Listening and Reading, but not with immersion and immersion-type activities.

DISCUSSION

The results are consistent with those of many studies in first and second language acquisition showing the superiority of self-selected reading over traditional instruction (Krashen, 2004). More important they are consistent with the results of studies that suggest that some kinds of comprehensible input are more effective than others in promoting language acquisition. Sawako and Kenta certainly received comprehensible input during their immersion experiences: both engaged in conversation with native speakers, and Sawako heard English at school and in subject matter classes, but this kind of input was not *optimal*.

Krashen and Mason (2020) have hypothesized that *optimal input*, input that produces the most rapid and efficient language acquisition, has these characteristics:

- (1) It is comprehensible.
- (2) It is very interesting, or *compelling*.
- (3) It is rich in language. $i+1$ is present and is supported by context. Rich means that it contains language that acquirers are ready to acquire ($i+1$; Krashen, 1985, page 101).
- (4) It is abundant: language acquisition of any item, vocabulary or grammar, requires many exposures (e.g., many stories, many books).

Ordinary conversation may fail to satisfy one or more of these conditions:

- Some speakers are quite skilled at ensuring second language acquirers understand what they say or exhibit greater goodwill that supports listeners' comprehension. But some talk too rapidly or use language beyond the acquirer's competence.
- Some conversations with native speakers are not particularly interesting and consist largely of light conversation with the same questions and comments repeated, as in exchanges with employees in stores and restaurants. Such conversations are rarely rich in language.

- Input in immersion and conversation groups *may* be plentiful and provide abundant opportunities to acquire, but this is not always the case. A second language acquirer may go hours or even days with no input, and their favorite conversation partners may not show up or have limited availability, etc.

In contrast, Story Listening and pleasure reading can supply large amounts of comprehensible, highly interesting, and rich input on demand. They are made or selected to be very interesting, they contain rich language, and they are, in many cases, always available. ⁽¹⁾

Of course, there are gaps in our explanation. Most important, we used the same measure of competence, scores on the TOEIC, in both cases. Perhaps reading contributes to scores on standardized tests, but not real-world competence. Those, however, who do well on the TOEIC also report competence in a wide variety of real-world tasks.

For example, more of those performing at the highest level of the reading test claimed that they could do “CAN-DO” reading tasks than those with lower TOEIC reading scores ($r = .42$; Power, Kim, & Weng, 2008), e.g.: “Read and understand magazine articles like those found in *Time* or *Newsweek*, without using a dictionary.”

Similarly, more of those performing at the highest level on the TOEIC listening test claimed they could perform CAN-DO listening tasks than those at the lowest TOEIC level e.g. “Understand explanations about how to perform a routine task related to my job.” ($r = .5$).

This was not the result of studying magazine articles or practicing listening to instructions on doing a task. Rather, competence to do the tasks was the result of overall language competence. Of great interest is that pleasure reading is an excellent predictor of TOEIC scores (Mason and Krashen, 2017). Thus, pleasure reading may be a good way to prepare students to perform in English in variety of situations, including on the TOEIC exam (Krashen and Mason, 2017).

Additional evidence that reading leads to more than high scores on standardized tests comes from Stokes, Krashen and Kartchner (1998) who reported that the best (and only significant) predictor of aural competence in using the subjunctive in conversation among second language acquirers was the amount of reading they had done in Spanish. Length of residence in Spanish speaking country, years of study of Spanish, and specific study of subjunctive were not significant predictors of accuracy of using the subjunctive. Only reading was significant.

CONCLUSIONS

The results are surprisingly consistent: Reading for pleasure, a form of *optimal input*, appears to be a better option for second language acquisition than immersion. But it will take more evidence than we have presented here to result in any change in procedures or policy. Returning to Dabrowski (2003), discussed earlier, when the officers were asked what they did to maintain their competence in their second language, only about half mentioned reading and only 15% thought that reading was the best way to maintain their competence.

Note

- (1) “A book can be pocketed and discarded, scrawled and torn into pages, lost and bought again. It can be dragged out from a suitcase, opened in front of you when having a snack, revived at the moment of waking, and skimmed through once again before falling asleep. It needs no notice by phone if you can’t attend the appointment fixed in the timetable. It won’t get mad if awakened from its slumber during your sleepless nights. Its message can be swallowed whole or chewed into tiny pieces. Its content lures you for intellectual *Why and What* adventures and it satisfies your spirit of adventure. You can get bored of it—but it won’t ever get bored of you.”
- (2) — Kató Lomb, *Polyglot: How I Learn Languages* (2008; p. 76-77).

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APPENDIX A

Table 1. Kenta's books during spring vacation

Publisher (Author)	Title and Author	Pages
Oxford level 3	Chemical Secret (Tim Vicary)	64
Heinemann 2200	The Return of the Native (Thomas Hardy)	96
Grosset & Dunlap	Hardy Boys 31 (without a Train) (Franklin W. Dixon)	192
HarperCollins	The Giver (Lois Lowry)	240
Penguin Level 5	The Great Gatsby (F. Scott Fitzgerald)	78
Macmillan level 6	Officially Dead (Richard Prescott)	75
Cambridge 6	Nelson's Dream (J. M. Newsome)	112
Bloomsbury Children's Books	Holes (Louis Sachar)	240
Atheneum Books for Young Readers	It's not the End of the World (Judy Blume)	240
Puffin Books	Fudge a Mania (Judy Blume)	176
Puffin Books	Superfudge (Judy Blume)	208
Dutton Books for Young Readers	Double Fudge (Judy Blume)	224
Macmillan Children's Books	Freckle Juice (Judy Blume)	80
Puffin Books	Otherwise Known as Sheila the Great (Judy Blume)	161
Delacorte Books for Young Readers	Friend or Fiend? With the Pain and the Great One (Judy Blume)	130
Macmillan Children's Books	Iggie's House (Judy Blume)	161
Atheneum Books for Young Readers	Kira Kira (Cynthia Kadohata)	272

Bradbury Press	The One in the middle is the Green Kangaroo (Judy Blume)	32
Atheneum/Richard Jackson Books	Dennie (Judy Blume)	192
Total pages		2973

(February and March 2014)

Table 2. Kenta's books from April to November 2014

Publisher	Title and Author	Pages
Bloomsbury/Scholastic	Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone by J. K. Rowling	220
Bloomsbury/Scholastic	Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets	258
Bloomsbury/Scholastic	Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	317
Bloomsbury/Scholastic	Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	636
Bloomsbury/Scholastic	Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	760
Little Brown	Twilight by Stephanie Meyer	498
Scholastic	The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins	373
Bradbury Press	Forever by Judy Blume	200
Mulholland Books	Confessions by Kanae Minato	240
Total pages		3502