

Story-listening with Japanese EFL Junior High School Students: Is Pre-teaching of Vocabulary Necessary?

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Abstract

Story-Listening is a foreign language teaching method based on Second Language Acquisition Theory. It has been used to test the effect and efficiency of subconscious acquisition-based teaching on the vocabulary gains of foreign language students. The Story-Listening (SL) method communicates using comprehensible and interesting input, but also provides rich and abundant input. Research on the effect and efficiency of SL on vocabulary retention has shown that SL is superior to list-memorization and more time efficient than SL plus vocabulary activities. The subjects in these previous studies were mostly college students, and they had at least six years of formal English education in secondary school. It may therefore be the case that their impressive retention rates were somehow influenced by their previous instruction. To deal with this possibility, two experiments were set up to determine whether early beginners of English as a foreign language can understand a story told in English using the Story-Listening method and incidentally acquire previously unknown words. Beginning level students may understand a familiar story when a teacher supports comprehension with drawings, facial expressions, and gestures, but we wanted to know if they could understand an unfamiliar story using the Story-Listening method and acquire new words. The results confirm that Japanese beginning level EFL 7th graders can: (1) understand an unfamiliar story spoken to them in English, a non-cognate language; (2) acquire words incidentally at an impressive rate; and (3) remember many of the words on a delayed post-test. The positive effect of an acquisition-based teaching method on vocabulary retention holds true for 12-year-old beginning level EFL students. Listening to both familiar and unfamiliar stories is effective.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition Theory, English as a foreign language, vocabulary acquisition rate, Story-Listening, beginners, pre-teaching of vocabulary

INTRODUCTION

The Story-Listening (SL) method (Mason & Krashen, 2020) communicates using comprehensible and interesting input, but also provides rich and abundant input (optimal input, Krashen, 1982, pages 62-77; Krashen & Mason, 2020). SL uses fairy/folk tales which have stood the test of time to help insure universal interest. The story is made comprehensible with the help of different kinds of support, such as drawings, words written on the board, synonyms, antonyms, occasional use of the students' first language, and taking advantage of the students' knowledge of the world (Krashen, Mason, & Smith, 2018).

A story usually lasts between 15 to 25 minutes for beginners and 30 to 40 minutes for intermediates. During SL, students receive a large amount of auditory input from the teacher's

speech. There is no pre-teaching of vocabulary before story-listening; no comprehension questions during or after story-listening, no weekly vocabulary tests, and no homework.

SL with reading has been used most extensively with EFL students in Japan at the junior college and university levels (Mason & Pendergast, 1997; Mason & Krashen, 2019, 2020; Mason, 2013, 2018), and also with senior citizens (Mason, 2011, 2013, 2021), young children taking private lessons (elementary school to high school), and recently with EFL students from different Asian countries (Mason, Smith, & Krashen, 2020; Smith, Mason, & Krashen, 2021).

Research on the effect and efficiency of SL on vocabulary retention has shown that SL is superior to list-memorization (Mason, 2005; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009), and more time efficient than SL plus vocabulary activities (Mason & Krashen, 2004, Clarke, 2019, 2020).

Previously published second language vocabulary acquisition research studies involving university and junior college students (Mason & Krashen, 2004, 2018; Mason, et al, 2009; Clarke, 2019, 2020), have reported gains of between .10 to .25 words per minute. In a recent study, with 12 international university students who were relatively new to the SL method but read an average of 614 pages each in less than three weeks, achieved a rate of .24 words per minute (Mason, Smith, & Krashen, 2020).

The subjects in these studies were mostly college students, and they had at least six years of formal English education in secondary school. It may therefore be the case that their impressive retention rates were somehow influenced by their previous instruction. To deal with this possibility, two experiments were set up to determine whether Japanese beginning level English as a foreign language junior high school students can understand a story told in English using the Story-Listening method and incidentally acquire previously unknown words.

Beginning level students may understand a familiar story when a teacher supports comprehension with drawings, facial expressions, and gestures, but this study wanted to determine whether they can understand an unfamiliar story using the Story-Listening method and acquire new words.

EXPERIMENT 1: THE THREE LITTLE PIGS

Subjects. The subjects were 37 1st year public junior high school students in a rural area in Hyogo prefecture in Japan. In the first term, which started in early June instead of early April, because of the COVID 19 pandemic crisis, their teacher (the second author) used the Total Physical Response method to teach some nouns and verbs for two weeks (8 classroom lessons). Then in July for four weeks, he used a different method to teach some structures using repetitions and drills before the summer break in early August. Among the students were those who had had some experience in English before they entered junior high school, but most were those who had no previous exposure to English or what is sometimes referred to as zero-level beginners.

In the second term students were told that they would listen to a story in English in class instead of studying with a textbook, the Story-Listening method (Mason & Krashen, 2020); the teacher would make it easy for them to understand the story, and there would be neither comprehension questions nor a test after listening to a story. Students were also informed that they would be required to write a summary of the story after they hear a story; the summary

would be used to provide information to the teacher to determine whether the story he told was interesting and comprehensible; and the summary would not be used to evaluate them for their grade.

It was further explained that students would receive a copy of the text of the story written in English and a copy of the list of the words with Japanese translation, but they were not required to study the list at home. Thus, there was no required homework. The students had not heard a story told in English until the second author began to tell a story in English at the beginning of the second term.

In the second term, after the subjects had listened to eight (8) short stories⁽²⁾ in two weeks, the second author, having read student summaries, felt that the students were accepting the new method and understanding the stories, and so the experiment began.

A familiar story, “The Three Little Pigs”⁽³⁾ was chosen, although it was much longer (516 words in total) than the previous eight stories they had listened to (e.g., The Hen and the Apple Tree, 182 words in total)⁽⁴⁾. Familiarity can aid comprehension and reduce both stress and anxiety. Students can predict and understand what the teacher is saying especially when the teacher uses comprehension-aiding supplementation (Krashen, Mason, & Smith, 2018), such as drawings, facial expressions, gestures, and occasional translation. As a result of understanding the story, it is expected some incidental vocabulary acquisition will occur.

The purpose of the study was to determine what Japanese beginning level EFL junior high school students’ vocabulary retention rate would be, compared to the rates obtained in previous studies with experienced adult students. These beginners may not do as well as the experienced adult students because they only knew a small number of words from the first semester and had had little exposure to or experience in hearing stories spoken in English.

Procedure. The second author gave a 35-item vocabulary pretest just before telling the story.⁽⁵⁾ After finishing telling the story, he re-administered the same 35-item test as an immediate posttest. He did not give correct answers to the meaning of the words after the posttest, because the purpose of the experiment was to determine the retention rate of unfamiliar words from hearing a story just once without any activities or corrective feedback. The same test was administered a third time four weeks later. The reliability rates for each of the tests administered were the following: $r=.43$ for the pre-test, $.89$ for the posttest, and $.85$ for the delayed posttest.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As presented in Table 1, subjects made clear gains, and about half of the gains were maintained after four weeks. The rate of acquisition (words gained per minute of listening to the story) was an impressive .21 words per minute.

Story-listening with Japanese EFL Junior High School Students:
Is pre-teaching of vocabulary necessary?

Table 1. *Mean and S.D. for the three test scores, gain score after 4 weeks, rate and test reliability*

The Three Little Pigs (Class 3, N=37)	Pretest (8/31)	Posttest (8/31)	Mid Gain	Delayed (9/30)	Final gain	Rate (wpm)
Mean (SD)	4.03 (2.57)	15.84 (8.05)	11.81	8.59 (6.25)	4.56	0.21
KR-21	.43	.89		.85		

The number of items on the test = 35, Time spent = 22 minutes.

For this experiment, a copy of the text and the words were not distributed to the students, and they were not aware that they would be tested on the words after four weeks. The results show that beginning level EFL Japanese 7th graders can understand a story spoken in English, a non-cognate language, when the story is delivered using the Story-Listening method. Although the rate of .21 words per minute was impressive, “The Three Little Pigs” was a familiar story for the students of this study. In our next study we used an unfamiliar story with two classes of 7th graders, including the class that was in Experiment 1.

EXPERIMENT 2: LAZY JACK

The first author visited the school and replicated the experiment telling the story “Lazy Jack” to two different classes: Class 2 and Class 3. “Lazy Jack” is a simple English folktale that uses natural repetition of events. The first Story-Listening session took 26 minutes for Class 2, and the second Story-Listening session took 23 minutes for Class 3.

The pretest was given before she told the story. Their teacher (the second author of this paper) read each word aloud for the students as they could not read English words yet. This took about 5 minutes. After the first author told the story, the second author read each item aloud again, and the students took the translation test. This took about another 5 minutes. ⁽⁶⁾ The number of words on the test was 40. No corrective feedback was given, and no text or list were distributed. The delayed posttest was given after two weeks. ⁽⁶⁾

Results. Table 2 presents the results for each class.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of Pre-, Post- and Delayed Posttest, Mid Gain, Final Gain, Effect Size and Words per Minute Acquisition Rate*

Lazy Jack	Pretest Mean (SD)	Posttest Mean (SD)	Mid gain	Delayed Mean (SD)	Final gain	wpm
Class 2 (N=30)	5.40 (3.15)	11.53 (6.90)	6.13	10.47 (6.47)	5.07	.20
KR-21	0.54	0.85		0.84		
Class 3 (N=35)	5.84 (3.25)	12.40 (7.67)	6.56	10.23 (7.40)	4.39	.19
KR-21	0.54	0.88		0.88		

Time spent to tell the story: Class 2 = 26 minutes, Class 3 = 23 minutes, k=40

There was no significant difference in gains between Class 2 and 3 ($t=0.525$, $df=32.596$, 2 tailed $p=0.599$).⁽⁶⁾

CONCLUSION

The rates seen here (.20 and .19 words per minute) are close to the rates obtained in Clarke's study with Japanese junior college EFL students, (.19 wpm) (Clarke, 2019, page 158), and with American high school students who were taking Japanese as a foreign language (.17 wpm) (Mason & Krashen, 2018, page 8). Results are also much better than the rates reported for conscious vocabulary learning (.005 wpm: McQuillan, 2019; .09 and .02: McQuillan, 2020; .007wpm: Lee, Lee & Krashen, 2014). The results confirm that: Japanese beginning level EFL 7th graders can (1) understand an unfamiliar story spoken to them in English, a non-cognate language; (2) acquire words incidentally at an impressive rate, and (3) remember many of the newly acquired words on a delayed post-test. The positive effect of an acquisition-based teaching method on vocabulary retention holds true for 12-year-old Japanese junior high school beginning level EFL students. Listening to both familiar and unfamiliar stories is effective.

Notes

(1) Story-Listening. In a Story-Listening lesson, a teacher tells a story, usually a fairy/folk tale which has stood the test of time for universal interest. The teacher tells the story using language that she thinks the students already know. There will be some words, or parts of the story that students don't fully understand. The teacher makes the story comprehensible with the help of many different kinds of support, such as drawings, written words on the board, synonyms, antonyms, word families occasional use of the students' first language, and taking advantage of the students' knowledge of the world. Use of this kind of support ensures that the students will easily understand the content of the story. Again, language acquisition is only possible when students understand what they hear or read. (Mason, B., & Krashen, S. 2020. Story-Listening: A brief introduction. *CATESOL Newsletter*, July, 53(7). https://www.catesol.org/v_newsletters/article_158695931.htm)

(2) The titles of the stories that students heard before “The Three Little Pigs.”

1. The dark dark house
2. The soup Casper
3. The little frog
4. The teeth
5. The sweet porridge
6. The very hungry caterpillar
7. The hen and the apple tree
8. Mmm...cookies

(3) **The Three Little Pigs (516 words)**. Once upon a time there was an old mother pig. She had three little pigs. Her house was very small. She was poor. She did not have enough food for her little pigs. So, she sent them out into the world. The first little pig was very lazy. He didn't want to work at all, and he built his house out of straw. The second little pig worked

a little bit harder, but he was somewhat lazy too, and he built his house out of sticks. Then, they sang and danced and played together the rest of the day. The third little pig worked hard all day and built his house with bricks. It was a sturdy house. There was a fireplace and chimney. The next day, a wolf came. He saw the straw house, and he smelled the pigs inside. His mouth began to water. So, he knocked on the door and said, "Little pigs, Little pigs! Let me in! Let me in!" But the little pig saw the wolf's big paws through the keyhole. He answered, "No! No! No!" Then the wolf showed his teeth and said, "Then I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down." So, he huffed, and he puffed, and he blew the house down! But the first little pig escaped. He ran away to the second little pig's house. The wolf came to the second house made of sticks. He saw the house. He smelled the pigs inside and his mouth began to water. So, he knocked on the door and said, "Little pigs, Little pigs! Let me in! Let me in!" But the little pigs saw the wolf's pointy ears through the keyhole, so they answered, "No! No! No!" So, the wolf showed his teeth and said, "Then I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down." So, he huffed, and he puffed, and he blew the house down! The two little pigs ran away fast to the brick house. The wolf came to the brick house. The three little pigs were very scared. The wolf knocked on the door and said, "Little pigs, Little pigs! Let me in! Let me in!" But the little pigs saw the wolf's narrow eyes through the keyhole, so they answered, "No! No! No!" So, the wolf showed his teeth and said, "Then I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down."

Well! He huffed, and he puffed. He puffed and he huffed. And he huffed, huffed, and he puffed, puffed.

But he could not blow the house down. The wolf was angry. The wolf climbed up the chimney. The little pig made up a fire and put on a big pot. In the pot, it was full of boiled water. When the wolf was coming down the chimney, the little pig opened the lid, and plop! The wolf fell into the boiled hot water. So, the little piggy put on the cover again, boiled the wolf up, and the three little pigs ate him for dinner. The End

(4) **The hen and the apple tree (182 words).** One November day, a hen went outside. She saw a big apple tree in the forest. The hen said, "This is odd. There was no tree here yesterday." At that moment, the tree said, "Some trees grow fast one day." The hen walked around and looked at the tree. The hen said, "This is odd. This tree has 10 toes. The apple tree has no toes." The tree said, "Some trees have toes. Come and eat some apples. Apples are delicious." The hen looked at the tree and said, "This is odd. This tree has two ears. The apple tree has no ears." The apple tree said, "Some trees have 2 ears. Come here eat apples. They are so delicious." The hen flew up and looked at the apple tree. The hen said, "This is odd. In November, this apple tree has many leaves. In November, the tree has no leaves." The apple tree said, "Some trees have leave....achew!" The leaves are gone and there was a wolf. The hen ran away home. The End

(5) **The words tested for each story**

The Three Little Pigs

poor, sent out, didn't want to, work, built, straw, harder, sticks, bricks, sturdy, fireplace, chimney, work, came, saw, smelled, inside, knocked, let me in, teeth, huff, puff, clow, blew, escaped, angry, climbed up, fire, pot, boiled water, opened, lid, fell into

Lazy Jack

lazy, look for, finally, job, farmer, hire, 6 o'clock, at the end of the day, wrap, payment, Welcome home, lost, Why didn't you~, silly, I'm sorry, remember, the next day, again, jug of milk, spill, carry, head, dozen, fall down, break, butcher, rope, meat, stray dog, goat, daughter, a lot of, build, wife, happily.

(6) The decision was made to give the delayed posttest after two weeks instead of the originally planned four weeks because we thought there was a good possibility that students would hear the same words on the test during these four weeks. The students were listening to 4 different stories each week and the stories were getting longer, richer in vocabulary, and more complex. If we had waited for 4 weeks for the delayed posttest, the students might have heard the words on the test in the 16 stories by the time they took the delayed posttest. For research methodological reasons, we did not want students to have the possibility of acquiring post-test words during these four weeks – hearing sixteen stories - between posttest and delayed posttest.

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