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When Progress Stops: The Continuing Saga of Mr. Tanaka

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Abstract

Mr. Tanaka is a 43-year-old Japanese man who works in a hospital radiology department in Osaka, Japan. From January 2009 to January 2010, he read over 6,456 pages of mostly graded readers in English and scored 655 on the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) in January 2010, gaining 180 points in one year starting from January 2009. He continued reading after that, but after 16 months his TOEIC score remained virtually static (650). This paper presents Mr. Tanaka's reflections and speculates on why his progress stopped, positing the teacher's inexperienced suggestions as to how to guide a student at the intermediate level, Mr. Tanaka's reluctance to completely trust the principles of free voluntary reading, and his dogmatic faith in the mainstream approach which had betrayed him in the past and had now done so again.

Key Words: second language acquisition; English as a foreign language; the reading hypothesis, comprehensible input, optimal input, TOEIC

Introduction

Mr. Tanaka is a 43-year-old man who works in a hospital radiology department in Osaka, Japan. He graduated from a four-year vocational school majoring in radiology and began working at age 21. After graduation, he experienced no further interest in studying English until he was 40. I met Mr. Tanaka, the father of one of my private English students, in 2008. I had furnished the parents of all my students some orienting information about language acquisition and literacy development and had asked these parents to read my book in Japanese, *FVR and Fairy/Folk Tale Listening* (Mason 2006a). These materials provoked in Mr. Tanaka an interest in the Reading Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985, 2003, 2004) and stimulated him to read easy English graded readers on his own initiative beginning in April 2008. Within three months, he developed a more serious interest in improving his English by reading for pleasure and began keeping an accurate record of his reading.

His reading and TOEIC results can be heuristically divided into three periods (Table 1):

- Period I: July 2008 to January 2009; 6 months. Mr. Tanaka read 2,590 pages of graded readers in English. He scored 475 on the TOEIC in January 2009.
- Period II: February 2009 to January 2010; 12 months. Mr. Tanaka read 6,456 pages (~124 pages/week), increasing his TOEIC score from 475 to 655, a gain of 180 points (described in Mason, 2011).
- Period III: February 2010 to May 2011; (16 months). Mr. Tanaka continued reading graded readers and some authentic books for young adults (e.g., books in the *Marvin Redpost* series by Louis Sachar and books by Judy Blume) as well as fiction best-sellers (e.g., *Twilight*). He also read newspapers and watched movies. At my suggestion, Mr.

Tanaka took private 1-1 classes with a native English speaker. These included assigned materials followed by discussion with verbal correction of his errors in speaking.

Table 1 shows that Mr. Tanaka consistently read about 100 pages/week over periods I and II, until January 2010, the amount I typically suggest to my students. But his rate dropped to less than 40 pages/week during period III.

Table 1: Gains on TOEIC scores and number of pages read over three periods

Period	I	II	III
	July 2008 January 2009	February 2009 January 2010	February 2010 May 2011
Interval between tests	6 months (24 weeks)	12 months (52 weeks)	16 months (64 weeks)
Pages read	2,590	6,456	2,515 (735) ^a
Pages read/week	107.9	124.2	39.3 (11.5)
TOEIC gain		180 (475-655)	-5 (655-650)
Total Score (L/R)		655(L330/R325)	650(L350/R300)

L=listening; R=reading.

a: see the section below Reactions Based on the Theory for details on these figures.

A Disappointment

In May of 2011, Mr. Tanaka took the TOEIC test again, 16 months after the previous one. Both Mr. Tanaka and I expected that his score would have further improved, but it did not. His May 2011 TOEIC score was 650 (Listening 350 and Reading 300), five points lower than his January 2010 TOEIC score (Listening 330 and Reading 325). His reading score declined 25 points. He reflected on this result in writing as follows. (Written in Japanese, translated by the researcher.)

Regretfully the score did not change much from last year. Maybe I am in a stagnation stage. I do not mean to make excuses, but I was not in the best condition due to a lack of sleep the night before the test.

I was disturbed to find that my reading score went down this time. By the way, regarding vocabulary, there were no words that I did not understand on the test. I did not have enough time to finish the reading section of the test. I was 15 minutes short of time answering the questions. I experienced the same thing the last time I took the test. Next time, I might start answering the questions from the last page where the questions are more difficult.

I am not convinced of the result, so I will take the test again in the near future. I might earn a higher score if I take a test-taking strategy course, but getting a high score is not my real goal. I wonder what the best thing is for me to do now. I am certain that I understood the reading questions better than before. Maybe I am not fast enough to finish the test. I wonder if that is because I am over 40 years old. I feel that my intellectual ability may be limited due to age. Is there anything else I can do? My goal is not to get a good score on the test, as I am not a student anymore (although it would be great if I could get a high score). What I want is to understand messages in English, to read magazines and books in English. To tell you the truth, I really don't care about my reading speed either. But if I do take that as a goal, I

need to increase my vocabulary size. Do you think it's a good idea to make a list and memorize words?

Mr. Tanaka attributed his lack of improvement during Period III to the following factors:

1. His reading speed was too slow. (He did not have enough time to finish the test.)
2. He had not slept well the night before.
3. Potentially suboptimal test-taking strategies.
4. Age-related cognitive decline.

Mr. Tanaka felt certain that his overall English proficiency was better at the end of Period III than at the beginning, because:

1. He understood all the words on the test.
2. He could better comprehend the questions.

Mr. Tanaka contemplated two strategies for subsequent improvement on his TOEIC score:

1. Taking a test-taking strategy course.
2. Making a vocabulary list and memorizing the words.

Theoretical Analysis

The Optimal Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Mason, 2020) propounds that *optimal* input must satisfy the following conditions: 1) be comprehensible, 2) be compelling, 3) be rich, 4) be abundant, and 5) refrain from imposing student accountability via frequent testing.

Mr. Tanaka's activities since April 2010 were not consistent with what we know about efficient language acquisition (Krashen, 1982, 1985, 2003).

- 1) **Incomprehensible input:** In February 2010, Mr. Tanaka discontinued a class which involved listening to stories made comprehensible by the teacher and reading books he self-selected under supportive teacher guidance. He turned instead to taking private lessons from a native speaker who emphasized reading newspaper articles and watching movies selected by the teacher. Although he reported that he found the content interesting, the material might have been too difficult to adequately understand.

- 2) **Forced Speech, Interaction, Comprehension Checking, and Corrective Feedback:** The private lessons emphasized discussing content. During the lesson, Mr. Tanaka was regularly asked to read a short newspaper article aloud to his instructor. Mr. Tanaka was then asked to give his opinions on what he had just read. When he watched a movie, the movie was stopped in several places and he was asked comprehension questions. Then, the instructor responded to Mr. Tanaka and continued the conversation. There were 35 2 h sessions over this 16-month period.

- 3) **Reduced amount of rich “i+1” input.** The amount of reading Mr. Tanaka reported for period III was 3,250 pages, consisting of 2,515 pages (the *Twilight Saga*) and 735 pages from graded readers and Perfection Learning books by Anne Schraff⁽¹⁾ written at the 3rd- to 6th-grade reading levels. Mr. Tanaka reported to me that he understood these books but didn't understand the books by Meyer well. The 3,250 pages reported for period III in Table 1 may be an overestimate. He told me that there were many words in *Twilight* he did not know, and he had to re-read sections in order to understand them. The actual

number of pages read and understood might have been as low as 725 pages in the graded readers and Perfection Learning books. He said he read *Identity* (Kundera) but did not finish it (176 pages). We do not know how much of the book Mr. Tanaka read nor how much of it was comprehensible for him.

- 3) **Conscious learning of vocabulary:** Mr. Tanaka reported that he had used a bilingual dictionary and his iPod to memorize words and commented that he had found memorizing words in this manner to be boring.

Discussion and Conclusion

Krashen (2011) and Mason (2005) describe unsuccessful reading programs. The reasons postulated for the failure of these programs appear to be the same that prevented Mr. Tanaka from improving in period III:

- 1) The books that he read were too difficult (lack of comprehensible input).
- 2) The books that he read were insufficiently interesting, so he did not finish them.
- 3) Because he was forced to speak, his affective filter was likely high as he was monitoring his output with consciously learned rules.
- 4) There was insufficient appropriate reading material (lack of abundant input).
- 5) There was insufficient input at the $i+1$ level (lack of rich input).

Reflection on my advice to Mr. Tanaka, ten years later

In retrospect, the suggestion that I gave Mr. Tanaka for period III was wrong. I advised him to have conversation sessions with a native speaker of English for interaction and output

practice. Forced output, interaction, conscious attempts to learn difficult words, and corrective feedback did not seem to work. I had thought that he was ready to leave the input-only program (listening to stories and reading books guided by a teacher) when he reached the TOEIC 655 level, but it seems clear now that what he needed was more optimal input.

Even if Mr. Tanaka had read substantially less during Period III, he would quite likely have made more progress without taking the private lessons. Case histories have shown that it is possible to gain significantly on the TOEFL when students receive optimal input. If the input is rich, interesting, and comprehensible, sometimes students can read less than 150 pages per week and make significant gains on the TOEFL (Mason, 2006b).

Mr. Tanaka should have continued to read more intermediate level graded readers for enjoyment instead of struggling through *Identity* and *Twilight*. He should have continued to hear more folktales for enjoyment instead of watching movies that he had difficulty understanding. He should have spent more time in the silent period instead of being forced to produce, because he was likely not yet ready to speak, at least not in the ways or quantities pulled for in the private lesson situation.

There is evidence that neither output nor interaction is necessary for efficient language acquisition. I have elsewhere reported on Miyako, another former student, who attained a TOEIC score of 975 from reading nearly the complete works of Agatha Christie (Mason, 2017). Sawako, yet another former student, did not gain much on the TOEIC after living a year in Canada, staying with an English-speaking family, going to an English school, and attending some community college courses taught in English. But after she subsequently returned to Japan, she gained 85 points on the TOEIC (810-895) in one semester from hearing 30 stories in class and reading 1,740 pages of graded readers at home (Mason & Krashen, 2019). Kenta (Mason & Krashen, 2020) gained 170 points (625-795) on the TOEIC in ten months from reading 6,475 pages.

Mr. Tanaka was not discouraged

This is what Mr. Tanaka said in the last part of his reflection (translation lightly edited for clarity):

Although the test score was not good, I know that I have been getting better. I began to understand TV programs in English, such as documentary films with their generally relatively slower rate of speech (narration). English became fun for me. I realize that I did not read a lot of easy books last year, so I will start again from where I left off at the beginning, and in the same way as what had worked best for me: Reading a lot of books that I enjoy and understand. I began to read the Perfection Learning books that you lent me right away when I came home today. I read half of a book at one sitting. There were some words that I felt were difficult, but fewer of them as before. Because I had read the *Twilight* series, I must have learned more words, and had no problem—the dictionary was not necessary at all. I might start reading books by Sydney Sheldon, which you said might be more suitable for me than *Twilight*. I would like to re-read some of the books that I read before. I would like to see whether I understand them better now than the first time I read them. I wish I had access to more books!

When Mr. Tanaka received his disappointing result, he began to wonder whether he should study for tests, memorize words, and learn test-taking strategies. I felt guilty for having

given him advice to take lessons from a native speaker teacher. I did not have the evidence at that time (ten years ago) to be confident that optimal input alone could help students improve all the way to TOEIC 975. However, at the end of his reflection, Mr. Tanaka concluded that reading was the cause of his large gains on the TOEIC.

His progress will continue, I predict, when he has more access to interesting books and refocuses his attention on what really counts in language acquisition and literacy development: Optimal input in the form of reading for pleasure.

What I learned from this experience is that a teaching method that does not supply all of the characteristics of optimal input (Krashen, 1982, pages 62-77; Krashen & Mason, 2020) will result in very little or zero acquisition (Krashen 1982, page 62), and that optimal input alone could have helped Mr. Tanaka progress steadily across the entire period of his endeavor—as it has helped others; as it can help everyone.

Note:

(1) Passage Novels: By Anne Schraff | Reading 3-6 | Lexile Level 440-780 | Interest Level 6-12. <https://www.perfectionlearning.com/secondary-language-arts/striving-readers/passages-novels.html>

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