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70 Hours of comprehensible Input = 286 Hours of Traditional Instruction

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Abstract

Japan faces a significant challenge in improving its English language proficiency, lagging behind global and regional averages. This study addresses this issue by examining language teaching methodologies. While language education has evolved in the last half-century, the Japanese system still relies on outdated practices despite raising language competency standards. Language is best acquired when understood, not through speaking, writing, error correction, or memorization. This study explores the potential of eliminating traditional practices hindering language acquisition and increasing input-based instruction. A three-year experiment was conducted at a public junior high school in Japan, involving an experimental group receiving input-centered instruction and control groups taught traditionally. Results indicated no significant difference in final academic ability test scores among groups despite that the control groups spent 286 extra hours of conscious learning. This suggests that meaningful input without practices such as homework, forced output, error correction, and vocabulary memorization can be as effective for language acquisition, highlighting the superiority of a pure optimal input approach. This study underscores the importance of meaningful input in language teaching methods and challenges the efficacy of traditional language teaching methods. By eliminating impediments to language acquisition, it supports the claim that comprehensible input is the primary driver of language acquisition, offering a more efficient path to language proficiency. The findings have implications for language education reform, advocating for a shift towards input-based methodologies.

PROBLEM

Japan's scores on the TOEFL are not impressive, far behind the world average as well as the scores of several other countries, including those in Asia with similar levels of poverty.[1]

We focus here on language teaching methodology. The field of language teaching has made enormous progress in the last 50 years, but according to our observations, we have not taken advantage of this new knowledge. In fact, obsolete methods are not only still in place but are applied even more rigorously: The Japanese government keeps raising the standard of suggested English competency, but the teaching approach has not changed for the last 50 years. For example, the government now suggests that junior high school graduates master 2,400 words. 40 years ago, it was only less than 1000 words.[2]

PROPOSED SOLUTION

This problem can be solved by using methods consistent with The Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982, 1985, 2003). The Input Hypothesis claims that the only efficient way to teach language is to provide comprehensible language input (Krashen, 2004, 2011). Studies done over the last 40 years have repeatedly confirmed the

superiority of "comprehensible input"-based methods over skill-based methods (See sdkrashen.com).

Study after study has shown that we acquire language when we understand what we hear and read. We do not acquire language when we speak or write, when we get our errors corrected, or when we study grammar rules and memorize vocabulary. The input hypothesis claims that input is the cause of language acquisition and not output. The theory also maintains that forcing output and correcting errors not only does not increase competence in the language but also increases students' anxiety. It is a hindrance to language acquisition (Krashen, 1982, 1985, 2003; Truscott, 1996).

Very few argue against the effects of acquiring a language via comprehensible input (Truscott, 2015, Chapter 6). Teaching methods seem to have gradually shifted toward the use of the "comprehensible input" methodology in classrooms, but we have not yet reached the desired results.

THE FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

Our view is that we have not gone far enough in applying the principles supported by research. What would happen if we eliminated all activities that previous studies (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen, 1985; Truscott, 1996; Kohn, 1999, 2007) concluded were obstacles to acquisition, and offered classes that were more closely aligned with the input theory? What would happen if we eliminated audio-lingual-like activities, output, and error correction and added more input to our classes?

Obstacles have been identified as including (1) a focus on early "forced speech", speaking and writing before natural acquisition has had a chance to take place, forcing students to rely on what they have learned, not what they have acquired (Krashen: Forced Output), (2) evaluating students even though they have not had sufficient comprehensible input (Kohn, 1999), (3) forcing students to memorize unfamiliar words, rather than naturally and gradually acquiring them (Mason, Ae, & Krashen, 2022), (4) insisting that students understand each word and grammar rule perfectly (e.g., Intensive grammar translation reading).

Several studies have already shown that "optimal input" alone is more effective and efficient in improving English as a foreign language than eclectic teaching methods that include the above obstacles (Mason, 2013, 2018). [3] What would happen if we eliminated audio-lingual-like activities from junior high school English classes, and added comprehensible input to the conventional method?[4]

EXPERIMENT
Subjects and the independent variable

The subjects in the experimental group were 112 students who entered a public junior high school in 2020 in Miki-city in Hyogo Prefecture. Miki-city is a small rural city that has a total population of just under 75,000. [5] The spring of 2020 was the year when the pandemic started, and the new semester started in mid-June instead of in mid-April.

In the first two weeks, the teacher (the second author) used mainly TPR [6] to introduce basic nouns and verbs. After that, he taught his classes with a method that included a story (TPRS). [7] In the 2nd term, the teacher told stories in English using the Story-Listening (SL) method. [8] The Story-Listening method aims to provide a large amount of optimal input for natural language acquisition without skill-based activities (Mason & Krashen, 2020).

From the third semester on, the teacher was obliged to use the government-regulated textbook and workbooks purchased by the school, but he continued with an input-centered approach. He used the SL method to teach the content of each chapter in the textbook. He created a story in every chapter and told the story using the words and structures that his students had been already exposed to and understood, and he also used the words and structures that the chapter of the textbook included. The subjects had listened to 46 folktales and fairy tales in English in the previous term, so this approach went smoothly. This method allows students to naturally review previously introduced language by listening to what the teacher says.

Story-Listening is not merely reciting a memorized story in English. Instead, a teacher uses Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation (Krashen, Mason, & Smith. 2018), which includes drawings, gestures, facial expressions, synonyms, antonyms, descriptions, and occasional translations. For example, if a teacher draws pictures on the first day to help his students understand words such as "big" and "little," "house" "door" "window" "chimney," "pig" and "wolf" from telling "The Three Little Pigs," the teacher can introduce more words in the

subsequent stories, such as "large" and "small," "ceiling" "floor" and "cow" and "horse." After introducing "Open the Door!" The teacher can introduce, "Please open the window" and sometime later, "Would you please close the door?" By including previously acquired words, the teacher can help his students understand new words and structures. The subjects had four classes per week. Grammar was explained in Japanese. There were no attempts to force students to produce complex sentences. Thus, the experimental group received the following instruction:

(1) The introductory story used in each chapter of the textbook designated by the government was rewritten by the teacher and was told by the teachers as a story using the Story-Listening method in English. The teacher used comprehension-aiding-supplementation, which included drawings synonyms, antonyms, explanations, and some translations, to make the auditory input comprehensible. This usually lasted 10 to 15 minutes.

(2) Grammar explanation was given in Japanese.

(3) The students worked on the workbooks in class. The students checked their answers by looking at the answers that came with the workbook.

(4) There was no assigned homework.

(5) There were no tests on new words.

(6) Starter-level graded readers were introduced toward the end of the second year and throughout the third year. Reading was done in class. The estimated time that the students were exposed to graded readers was about 10 hours.

As no previous studies were available on the effect of using natural language acquisition with junior high school students in a public junior high school in a program that lasted for three years, it was necessary to make sure that it was safe to continue the approach for the entire junior high school program. Thus, two experiments were carried out in the second term of the first year to determine if the natural language acquisition method (in this case, Story-Listening) was effective for listening comprehension and vocabulary retention.

In the second term, when the teacher told 46 stories, he required students to write a summary of each story they heard in Japanese. From reading the summaries his students wrote, the teacher confirmed that the students understood each story and developed better listening comprehension as the stories became longer and more complex. The stories were as short as 15 minutes at the beginning but gradually became longer and eventually lasted more than 25 minutes. The vocabulary retention rates from listening to stories were much better than we had expected (Mason & Ae, 2021). It was an experiment to find out whether Japanese students understood the story when they heard it in English and whether they had acquired any English new words and remembered them as a result of understanding the story. A familiar story, "The Three Little Pigs," in English was told without using Japanese. The rate of remembering was .21 words per minute when memory was tested after four weeks. The second study was done using a story that the students had never heard before. This time, a stranger visited the school and told the story (the first author). The test was given two weeks after the students heard the story, and the remembering rate was .19 words per minute (Mason & Ae, 2021). The results were similar to the rates obtained in previous studies using older subjects (Mason & Krashen, 2004, 2018; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009; Clarke, 2019, 2020). It confirmed that the Story-Listening method is effective for junior high school students who knew little English.

After entering the second year, in September (5th term) after the summer vacation, we administered an additional vocabulary test and the result showed that the rate of developing vocabulary size was satisfactory.

During the three years, the students took an academic proficiency test every term. The teacher compared the average scores of the experimental group during this time with the average scores of previous years' students. As the teacher decided it was safe to continue with the same method for the entire three years, he continued the study until the end of the third year.

Control Groups

The control groups were graduates in the years 2022 (N=120) and 2020 (N=130) who took classes using the skill-based traditional way. Their instructors explained grammar in Japanese and gave translations for the

sentences and new words. The teachers did not speak English in class. The students worked on drills and exercises using worksheets to prepare for tests, engaged in output activities and received corrective feedback on their speaking and writing output. They were given homework to memorize 20 new words every week and took a vocabulary test in every class. The students were given about two hours of homework each week including vocabulary memorization and worksheets on grammar. It was estimated that the students in the control groups spent at least 216 hours on English homework outside the classroom during the three years. One teacher taught English classes for each group for three years.

Length of the study and the Dependent Variable

The length of the study was three school years (June 2020 – January 2023). The dependent variable was performance on the final academic ability test that the 3rd-year (9th graders) junior high school students took in the last term of the last year before graduation. The tests were created by the same test-making company every year. These mock exams were based on "Hyogo Prefecture public high school entrance exam questions." [9]

RESULTS

The average score on the tests that the experimental group (graduation in 2023) took and the average scores on tests that the control groups took in their last term in their last year in junior high school are shown in the table below. One Way ANOVA analysis showed no significant difference among the three groups. (F=1.682, df=2, p=0.187) (Table 1).

Table 1. Academic Ability Test Results of the three groups in their last term.

Academic Ability Test	2020 Graduates (N=130) Control	2022 Graduates (N=120) Control	2023 Graduates (N=112) Experimental	Statistical significance
Mean (sd)	49.28 (24.42)	45.08 (22.80)	44.86 (15.42)	Not Significant

Most Japanese junior high school students go to a cram school after school. We investigated whether there was a significant difference in the number of times they attended a cram school among the three groups. The analysis showed that there was no significant difference in the total hours spent in cram schools among the groups (Table 2).

Table 2. The number of times each group attended a cram school per week.

Group	0/wk	1/wk	2/wk	3/wk	4/wk	Total	3~4/wks
2023 Graduates (N=109) Experimental	34	10	23	30	12	194	22%
2022 Graduates (N=116) Control	41	6	14	37	18	217	25%
2020 Graduates (N=122) Control	47	7	20	36	12	203	24%

Table 4 presents the estimated hours spent for three years in listening, reading, homework, and total study. The control groups had 350 hours of traditional instruction in class and 216 hours of traditional homework. This amounts to a total of 566 hours of traditional work for three years. The experimental group spent 350 hours in the classroom, but 70 hours of this was comprehensible input (60 hours of Story-Listening, and 10 hours of Self-

Selected Reading). They, thus, had 350-70=280 hours of traditional classroom instruction. They did no homework.

Table 3. Estimated hours spent for three years in traditional work and comprehensible input.

Group	Traditional Instruction	Comprehensible Input (Stories and Reading)
Control groups	566	0
Experimental	280	70

There was no difference in performance on the "academic ability" test taken in the last term of the last year (Table 1), even though controls had 286 hours more instruction (566-280). Seventy hours of comprehensible input had the same effect as 286 hours of traditional instruction.

DISCUSSION

The contents of recent high school entrance exams do not include questions using grammatical terms as they did in the past. High school entrance exams have changed and are now similar to university entrance exams in that they require comprehensive English proficiency and reading comprehension and speed are required to answer listening questions. Even the questions related to the conversational discourse cannot be solved without reading comprehension ability.

Adding more optimal English language input

Methods such as Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading (Mason, 2014, 2019) can provide students with optimal language input as stories and books. Self-selection and teacher guidance and suggestions ensure that all students get input that is comprehensible for them, which is why efficient language acquisition is possible for everyone. Because of this adjustment, the methods do not require repetitive conscious reviewing of the previous lessons.

When every student listens to enough interesting stories in a way that they understand, everyone receives the language that they are ready to acquire. Stories that they listen to and books that they are guided to by the teacher to read become longer and more complex and are not hard and uninteresting. Listening to stories is a conduit to reading (Krashen, 2018; Cho & Choi, 2008, Wang & Lee, 2007), a step to language acquisition and reading. When foreign language students can reach the reading level which is the level of the bestseller books for the general native-speaker audience, they can do well, if not perfectly, on language tests for foreign language learners.

Eliminating the four practices

The results of this study showed that subjects can make good progress when not only a part of the traditional lesson is replaced with comprehensible input but also when the following practices are excluded. This verifies that comprehensible input is the cause of language acquisition and not output and not deliberate study.

(1) Homework.

Teachers typically give their students homework to help them better understand the day's lesson, that is, consciously learned rules. Far more useful is providing more comprehensible input in the form of interesting stories and reading,

(2) Forced output, that is, forced production of aspects of language that have not yet been acquired.

For example, in the second semester of the first year of a public junior high school, the official guidelines require teachers to have students practice writing "thank-you letters" and orally present a "self-introduction speech." This cannot be done using naturally acquired language at this stage but requires memorized output; skill-based methods do not allow a silent period of providing input and waiting for the output to emerge by itself. In this study the teacher had the students listen to the teacher's self-introduction. Together with his assistant, he gave several examples of self-introduction. On another day, he drew two human faces on a chalkboard and introduced them in a Story-Listening style. In the following class, he brought in two puppets and let the puppets introduce themselves to each other. After giving students examples of self-introduction, the students became familiar with

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what self-introduction is like when it is done in English. After that, several samples of self-introductions in writing were given to the students and the teacher let them write their own self-introductions.

(3) Error correction.

It has been assumed that correction leads to more accurate output. Students also sometimes request to be corrected, as they too believe that "error correction" results in greater accuracy. But correcting mistakes has not produced improvement (Truscott, 1996; Mason, 2004). A correction is meant to tell or remind students about the appropriate grammar rule, but this knowledge is very difficult to remember and apply and does not become "acquired."

(4) Memorization of unlearned words.

The students in the control groups were given 20 words each week and were asked to memorize them. There was a weekly test, and the students were assessed on their memorization. They invented their own mnemonics to remember the words. This had only a short-term effect. They did well when tested on the weekly test but forgot many of the meanings soon after. List learning is less efficient than acquiring words from hearing stories (Mason and Ae, 2021; Mason, Ae, & Krashen, 2022).

Better Efficiency of A "Pure Optimal Input Only" Approach

Traditional methods containing some comprehensible input have been compared to input-based methods in previous studies and the results consistently showed that input-based methods are twice as effective and efficient as the eclectic approach (See: sdkrashen.com; Mason, 2013, 2018; Note 10). "Optimal Input" includes comprehensible language input, compelling content input, rich language input, and abundant input. "Pure" means that optimal input is given without conscious pre-teaching of grammar or vocabulary, forced output practice, vocabulary memorization, grammar drills and exercises, and error correction.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons for the long-lasting low English proficiency in Japan. We implemented a method grounded on the principles of the Input Hypothesis as much as we could in the environment of a public junior high school in Japan and excluded several practices used in conventional methods that have been reported to be impediments to language acquisition. Although only 20% of classroom time was dedicated to comprehensible input, the experimental group showed results comparable to the control groups, even though the control group did approximately 216 hours of traditional homework, such as worksheets and rote memorization of new vocabulary and the experimental group did no homework.

This suggests that an approach driven by meaningful input without these activities produces similar gains in language proficiency in less time. The findings strengthen the claims that correction, forced output, rote memorization, and homework are less effective for language acquisition than providing an input-rich environment.

We looked at outcomes using a mock high school entrance exam, but if we had used a test that looked at acquired outcomes rather than learned outcomes such as speaking and writing fluency and accuracy, the results might have been even more supportive of comprehensible input.

This experiment confirms that input is the cause of language acquisition. Even though they had only a meager 70 hours of input, because of its powerful effect, the experimental group did not have to spend extra hours of conscious learning. Thanks to the comprehensible input, they achieved their goals in much less time. We hope that this research clarified what should be included and what should be eliminated in a teaching method.

NOTES

(1) For example, in 2017, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology in Japan reported that more than 95% of grade 12 students were found to have English proficiency at only CEFR A1/A2 levels, despite five years of English education.
https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/kokusai/gaikokugo/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2018/04/06/1403470_03_1.pdf.

CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages

Based on the TOEFL, the English proficiency of Japanese students has been one of the lowest among the 20 Asian countries for the past 20 years. On the TOEFL test given on the internet, Japan ranked last among Asian countries ((TOEFL Test and score Data Summary 2004-2005 Test Year Data: www.ets.org/toefl).

(2) http://www5d.biglobe.ne.jp/~chujo/data/let2004.pdf https://www.asahi.com/edua/article/14410757

(3) "Optimal Input" means that the input provided to students is comprehensible, highly interesting, and rich in language, and is provided abundantly without forced output practice, conscious language study, and error correction (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Mason, 2020).

(4) A 12-year-old girl in Japan was read to when she was a toddler, and then she began to read books in English on her own and read many books in English. She read all of the Harry Potter series. She scored almost perfect on the TOEIC test https://www.kobe-np.co.jp/news/backnumber/201704/0012397441.shtml

A Taiwanese teenager became a best-seller author of a novel in the USA (Lee, 2021) from being read to and read books. https://www.amazon.com/stores/Hermione Lee/author/B097P7LZB4?ref=ap_rdr&store_ref=ap_rdr&isDramIntegrated=true&shoppingPortalEnabled =true (Smith, 2021).

(5) Miki-city population: https://www.city.miki.lg.jp/uploaded/attachment/36570.pdf

(6) TPR: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Total_physical_response

(7) TPRS: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TPR_Storytelling

(8) Story-Listening: https://www.storiesfirst.org/index.php/invitation-story-listening/

(9)https://www.syogakusya.co.jp/V01_VIEW/nyuushi/kouritsu_nyuushi.html?fbclid=IwAR2Dx5n7KCgt TgkHmyxhn4QOZPw5fDpNceQeOfnsfOvqN0WldjEb8y3Eats.

(10) The better efficiency of the "Pure Optimal Input Only" method can be also briefly demonstrated by the following comparison. A table in "A Teacher's Guide to TOEIC Listening and Reading Test: Preparing your Students for Success" (Oxford Publishing), indicates how much one's score is expected to improve in relation to the amount of time invested in test preparation studies.

https://elt.oup.com/elt/students/exams/pdf/elt/TOEIC_Teachers_guide_international.pdf). Our studies show that students can achieve similar gains in half the time from listening to stories and reading books (Mason, 2011; Mason & Krashen, 2020).

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