

## **Self-Selected Reading and TOEIC Performance: Evidence from Case Histories**

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### **Abstract**

Case histories are real science, as long as we do enough of them and pay attention to crucial characteristics of our subjects' experiences. The case studies presented here provide confirmation of central hypotheses in language acquisition and have interesting practical implications.

*Keywords:* extensive reading, graded readers, comprehensible input, TOEIC, rate of language acquisition

### **Why Case Histories?**

Case histories are sometimes dismissed as "anecdotal" and sometimes they are. Many of us have had conversations with friends and relatives who tell us that they know someone who mastered another language and did it entirely from grammar study. Such local and personal cases often seem to be convincing.

The problem, however, is that there may be serious confounds and omitted facts; problems that can be cleared up with additional case histories and making sure crucial information is present. When this is done, confounds are controlled, patterns emerge, and generalizations and hypotheses can be tested regardless of individual variation in age, personality, and external circumstances. Examining a large number of cases helps ensure this.

### **The Compelling Reading Hypothesis**

The focus in this analysis is what can be considered the central hypothesis in literacy and language development - The Comprehension Hypothesis. The Comprehension Hypothesis states that we develop language when we understand messages. This includes reading. The Reading Hypothesis, in fact, can be considered to be a special case of the Comprehension Hypothesis.

For input to be understood, readers must of course pay attention to it. It is more likely to happen when the message is interesting. It is even more likely to happen when the message is extremely interesting, or "compelling" (Krashen, 2011), so interesting that the acquirer is temporarily in a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990): When readers are in flow, they are not even aware of what language the text is written in. In other words, the story is what counts.

Texts are much more likely to be compelling and comprehensible if readers select the reading material themselves.

## **Previous Research**

Self-selected pleasure reading has done very well in the research.

### Correlational Studies

Correlational studies confirm that those who do more pleasure reading perform better on a wide variety of language tests. These studies are not simply correlational, but are often multivariate, controlling for a variety of potential confounds, such as the amount of writing students do (e.g. Lee, 2005). Of special interest here are findings based on measures that include standardized tests of academic English, such as the TOEFL (Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Constantino, Lee, Cho, and Krashen, 1997).

### Experimental Studies

Experimental studies evaluate achievement in classes in which a modest amount of time is set aside for self-selected pleasure reading, with little or no accountability: no tests on what is read, no book reports and students do not have to finish every book they start. The efficacy of "sustained silent reading" has been confirmed for first language and second language development, the latter in a wide variety of circumstances (e.g. Mason and Krashen, 1997; Krashen, 2004; Lee, 2007, Cho and Krashen, 2015; Smith, 2006).

### Case Histories

Case histories, in addition to those presented below, also show that self-selected reading is effective, for both first and second languages. First language studies include readers who were raised in extreme poverty who found a source of reading material, and far outperformed their classmates in literacy development, who had no easy access to books (Murray, reported in Shanahan, 2010; Canada, 2010). Second language success stories include Bishop Desmond Tutu and Mark Mathabane, who credit comic books with helping them acquire English and getting them interested in books (Krashen, 2004).

## **Case Histories as "Hypothesis Testing"**

The studies reviewed here provide a unique opportunity to test the "compelling" reading hypothesis: Subjects in four out of eight cases had no other source of input other than self-selected pleasure reading, and all subjects varied considerably in age. All, however, were both eager readers, and enthusiastic about improving their English, which limits the generalizability of the results.

The case histories presented below have added some highly desirable features: All subjects agreed to both take the TOEIC test at various times and keep a record of what they read, which made it possible to calculate growth in English language development and correlate it.

Case studies are typically regarded as only "hypothesis generating" (Neuman and McCormick, 1995, p. 106). The cases presented here, however, test hypotheses and are thus considered "scientific."

### Description of Cases

Several of the cases presented here were included in previously published studies (Krashen & Mason, 2015; Mason, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). All eight subjects were adult acquirers of English as a foreign language, and were native speakers of Japanese living in Japan. All had completed or were enrolled in an EFL class with the first author that focused on hearing stories in class and reading graded readers as homework. They all expressed an interest in continuing to improve their English at the end of the course.

The first author helped each acquirer engage in a self-selected independent reading program, with each reader reading only those books he or she wanted to read. Readers were asked to keep a log of what was read as well as the number of pages read, but were not asked to write summaries or book reports. Three of the subjects were enrolled in the first author's classes at the time they were engaged in independent reading outside of class.

Subjects ranged in age from 21 to 78 years old. The student who spent the least time reading was part of the program for four months and was one of the two youngest subjects. The student who read the most followed the program for more than three years, and was the oldest subject.

As noted earlier, subjects were also asked to take alternate forms of the TOEIC test at times convenient for them before, during, and after their reading program. The TOEIC (The Test of English for International Communications) consists of reading and listening subsections and is used world-wide as a test of English proficiency for adults.

Table 1 presents a description of the subjects. Also included is the number of weeks the subjects dedicated to self-selected reading.

Table 1. Description of Subjects

Reader	Gender	Age	Duration
Shinjiro	Male	21	45 weeks
Okada	Female	21	22 weeks
Kenta	Male	22	45 weeks
Kashihara	Male	35	156 weeks
Tanaka	Male	42	52 weeks
Adachi	Female	53	28 weeks
Fujita	Female	66	55 weeks
Nakano	Male	78	162 weeks

Table 2 presents examples of what the subjects read, as described in their logs. Note that for each reader, book choices were different.

Table 2. Description of Participants' Reading Materials

Reader	Reading Materials
Shinjiro	Graded readers and books for young adults
Okada	Books for young adults (e.g. books by Judy Blume) and easy best sellers
Kenta	Graded readers and other books (e.g. The Giver, Harry Potter series, books by Judy Blume)
Kashihara	Graded readers and other books for young adults (e.g. Harry Potter), and bestsellers
Tanaka	Graded readers and books for young adults (e.g. the Marvin Redpost series, books by Judy Blume and Louis Sachar) and young adult bestsellers (e.g. Twilight)
Adachi	Graded readers
Fujita	Graded readers. Books for young adults (e.g. The Book Thief, Twilight, Smart Women, You Belong to Me)
Nakano	Graded readers and books for young adults (e.g. Anne of Green Gables, Super Fudge and other Judy Blume novels, The Giver, Every Living Thing by James Herriot)

Table 3 presents the results, how much each reader gained on the TOEIC, based on their pre- and post-test scores. (For gains on the listening and reading subtests, see Krashen and Mason, 2015). Table 3 also contains the number of points on the TOEIC gained for each hour of reading, calculated based on the number of pages read, as reported by each subject, using an estimate of reading rate derived from studies reviewed by McQuillan (see research survey in Table 4 in McQuillan and Krashen, 2008, which underestimates rates because they are based on assigned, not self-selected texts).

Table 3. Pretest, gain, and points gained per hour of reading

Z	Pre	Gain	Pts/hr
Shinjiro	645	120	0.64
Okada	705	40	0.31
Kenta	625	170	0.87
Kashihara	220	400	0.62
Tanaka	475	180	0.85
Adachi	365	40	0.50
Fujita	580	165	0.42
Nakano	495	170	0.56
Mean	494.9	166.4	0.60
S.D	163.8	120.2	0.20

The overall result is astonishing. On the average, readers gained more than one-half point on the TOEIC for each hour of recreational reading. As seen in Table 3, there was some variation among subjects, which is to be expected, as each reader read different books, but the variation was not extreme: the standard deviation was modest. (1)

**What does this kind of gain mean?**

Table 4 describes TOEIC levels. Top companies in Korea require high TOEIC levels, with Hyundai requiring 800 and Renault requiring 750 (<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140326000917>). The Japanese Ministry of Education is considering interpreting a 780 TOEIC score as equivalent to a perfect score on the Center English Test, a test high school students take before taking college entrance examinations (<http://www.sankei.com/life/news/131231/lif1312310010-n1.html>).

Table 4. TOEIC scores and real-world competence.

905-990	International Professional Proficiency (Able to communicate effectively in any situation.)
785-900	Working Proficiency Plus (Able to satisfy most work requirements with language that is often, but not always, acceptable and effective.)
605-780	Limited Working Proficiency (Able to satisfy most social demands and limited work requirements.)
405-600	Elementary Proficiency Plus (Can initiate and maintain predictable face-to-face conversations and satisfy social demands.)
255-400	Elementary Proficiency (Speaker has functional, but limited proficiency. Able to maintain very simple face-to-face conversations on familiar topics.)
10-250	Basic Proficiency (Able to satisfy immediate survival needs.)

From: The Waikato Institute of Education; <http://wie.ac.nz/toeicconversion.htm>

According to our results, a reader can move from the bottom of the "Elementary Proficiency" level to the threshold of the "International Proficiency" in three years of relaxed, self-selected pleasure reading, assuming .6 points gained per hour and about an hour of reading per day (total 1095 hours).

The finding that the amount of free reading was strongly related to gains in literacy and language development is highly consistent with many previous studies, as noted earlier.

Of particular interest is Nation (2014). On the basis of a corpus analysis, Nation estimated that readers can move from elementary levels of vocabulary knowledge in a second language (knowledge of 2000 word families) to a very high level (knowledge of 9000 word families) after a total 1,223 hours of reading. Our results thus confirm that improving language competence through reading is "feasible if texts at the appropriate level are available" (Nation, 2014, p. 14). It also provides a clear and pleasant path to improved proficiency. As long as readers have access to a wide range of reading material, this will allow them to follow the kind of pathway described by

McQuillan (2016), choosing reading material of great interest to them at all levels.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> The simple correlation between the number of hours students read and gains was substantial ( $r = .94$ ). We found, however, that those with lower pretest scores made larger gains ( $r = .63$ ). To control for the effect of the pretest, a partial correlation was performed. The relationship between hours read and gains on the TOEIC was still very high,  $r = .92$ . All of the subjects did other things to improve their English in addition to reading. Three engaged in TOEIC test preparation, one listened to English radio stations, two studied vocabulary on their own. Our analyses (Krashen and Mason, 2015) revealed that none of these factors had any substantial or significant effect. Only hours spent reading was a significant predictor of TOEIC scores.

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