The Efficiency of Self-Selected Reading and Hearing Stories on Adult Second Language Acquisition

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Two groups of Japanese college students in Japan participated in an extensive reading class in which they listened to stories in English told by a teacher in class and read graded readers at home. One group consisted of English majors who took six other English classes using a form-based approach, and the other consisted of Health Science majors who took no other English classes. Both groups improved, but Health Science students' gains per hour of class-time were far greater; they were, in other words, more efficient.

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INTRODUCTION

The struggle between form-based and comprehensible-based methods is far from over. The research clearly supports the latter, but the former remains more popular in practice. Apparently, more empirical evidence is necessary to determine which approach is best.

This study contrasts students who participated in a comprehensible-input based class with those who were in a similar class but also had a considerable amount of form-based instruction in addition. We would expect some increase in gains with more instruction. The question, however, is whether the extra instruction was worth-while, that is, whether it was efficient.

PROCEDURE

Subjects

The participants were 16 first year students in the English department and 24 students in the Health Science department in a Junior College in Osaka, Japan. The students in the English department had seven English classes per week, and the Heath Science majors had only one class per week. The experiment was conducted in the second semester of their first year (12 weeks).

Treatment

Both groups received comprehension-based instruction once a week, for one hour, for one semester. Class-time was devoted to storytelling in which students were focused on the meaning and vocabulary of the story they were listening to. One story, from Grimm's Fairy Tales or other sources, was covered each session.

Target words, words thought to be unfamiliar to the students, were written on the board, and as the story was told, the teacher pointed to the words. Students raised their hands to indicate to the teacher when they did not understand the meaning

of the word, which the teacher then explained or clarified using a drawing. Students were also provided with a list of the words on paper, as well as a written version of the story. Students were tested on the words they had encountered in previous stories at the beginning of the lesson each week.

For homework, students engaged in self-selected reading. They were asked to read 60 to 100 pages from graded readers each week, about two to four books, and were asked to keep a record of books read, including the title, publisher, level of the graded readers, pages read and the time they spent reading. They were also asked to write a very short summary and reflection on each book they read. Students had access to a wide variety of graded readers from the university library.

Examination of the reading logs kept by students revealed that English majors were at a significantly higher level when the semester began. They reported reading books at the 600 and 1100 word levels, while the Health Science majors read books at the 200 to 600 word level. This difference was confirmed by their pretest scores on the cloze and writing tests (see results section).

In addition, English Majors had six additional hours of instruction per week in English, using Self-Access Pair Learning, a method in which students work in pairs using a textbook and audiotape. This approach consists of listening, speaking, pronunciation, writing and reading, with teacher intervention taking place only when there is a problem (Ross, 1992, p. 171). Even though Self-Access Pair Learning is not a teacher-fronted method, it has been shown to heavily emphasize form (Ross, 1992).

Measures

A 100-item cloze test was used as a pre and post-test. The passage was written at the 6th grade reading level and had approximately 1600 words with every 10th word deleted. Subjects received full credit if answers were grammatically and semantically correct, and full credit was given where there were mild spelling errors that did not influence the interpretation of the answer. The test-retest reliability of this measure is .87 (Mason, 2004).

Subjects also took a writing test at the beginning and end of the semester. The format for both was similar: Students were asked to read a story from an elementary level graded reader (1100 word level, less than 2000 words in length) and write a summary. Different stories were used for the pre- and post-test. The investigator totaled the number of words and phrases written for each essay, as well as the number of error-free phrases. (The usual procedure is to count error-free clauses; error-free phrases were analyzed here, the shorter unit chosen because of the high number of errors subjects made.)

The following example illustrates the procedure used:

Sample text: I woke up early on the morning. My father say, woke up Anna. When the train come, there is no one on the train.

Number of phrases = 7
1. I woke up
2. early on the morning
3. My father say
4. woke up Anna
5. when the train come

6. There is no one
7. on the train

Error-free phrases = 3 (numbers 1, 6 and 7; note that only the immediate context of the phrase is considered; thus "there is no one" is considered correct, even though the full context requires "there was no one."

Results

Table 1 presents the results for the cloze test. English majors started at a higher level, and gained seven points, while Health Science majors gained 4.4 points. The English majors, however, did not increase their advantage; effect sizes for pre- and post-tests were nearly identical, and gain scores were not significantly different ($t = 1.38$, $df = 38$; $p = .18$, two tails).

Table 1: Cloze test results

	Pre-test*	Post-test	gain	efficiency
English Majors	22.4 (8.8)	29.4 (11.7)	7 (6.13)	.06 (7/126)
Health Science Majors	14.9 (5.3)	19.3 (7.0)	4.4 (4.91)	.24 (4.4/18)
Effect Size	1.1	1.12		

*mean scores; standard deviation in parentheses

A more accurate way to compare the results is to consider efficiency, gains per hour of instruction. The English majors had much more instruction: Recall that they were taking seven hours of English per week, while the Health Science majors only had one English class per week. English majors spent 126 hours (10.5*12 weeks) and gained only seven points on the cloze test. (0.06 points per hour). Health Science majors spent 18 hours and gained 4.4 points. (0.24 points per hour). (Note that only class-time was included in the analysis: Homework was not included).

Both groups gained in writing fluency (number of words, table 2, and number of phrases, table 3). The advantage of the English majors was greater on the posttest than on the pretest (see effect sizes in tables 2 and 3), and they made significantly larger gains (for words, $t = 4.19$, $df = 38$, $p = .0002$, two tails; for phrases, $t = 4.09$, $df = 38$, $p = .0002$, two tails).

Once again, however, when efficiency was considered, the Health Sciences students did much better, gaining at three to four times the rate in terms in words and phrases written per hour of instruction.

Table 2: Number of words written

	Pre-test	Post-test	gain	efficiency
English Majors	104.9 (81.7)	249.7 (82.8)	144.8 (67.7)	1.15(144.8/126)
Health Science Majors	89.3 (65.2)	157.3 (55.7)	68.0 (48.3)	3.78 (68.0/18)
Effect Size	0.22	1.38		

Table 3: Number of phrases written

	Pre-test	Post-test	gain	efficiency
English Majors	20.9 (16.7)	51.6 (13.8)	30.7 (14.3)	.24 (30.7/126)
Health Science Majors	17.6 (13.9)	32.9 (11.7)	15.3 (9.4)	.85 (15.3/18)
Effect Size	0.21	1.46		

Results were similar for number of Error-Free phrases written (table 4), with the English majors showing greater gains, as indicated by pre and post-test effect sizes and the results of a t-test comparing gains ($t = 3.96$, $df = 38$, $p = .0003$, two-tails), but the Health Science students were more efficient.

Table 4: Number of error-free phrases written

	Pre-test	Post-test	gain	efficiency
English Majors	9.8 (10.4)	28.2 (14.4)	18.4 (12.4)	.15 (18.4/126)
Health Science Majors	6.2 (5.1)	13.0 (6.5)	6.8 (5.6)	.38 (6.8/18)
Effect Size	0.46	1.45		

Table 5 presents improvements in accuracy as the ratio of error-free phrases to total phrases written. Again, the English majors made better gains, but were less efficient.

Table 5: Percentage of error-free phrases

	Pre-test	Post-test	gain	efficiency
English Majors	47% (9.8/20.9)	55%(28.2/51.6)	8%	.06 (8/126)
Health Science Majors	35% (6.2/17.6)	40% (13/32.9)	5%	.28 (5/18)

DISCUSSION

This study is not a pure comparison of comprehensible-input versus focus on form instruction; in the story-telling/self-selected reading condition, there was some focus on form in class, as vocabulary was emphasized during the story-telling and students were tested on vocabulary. Neither of the post-tests, however, specifically emphasized vocabulary knowledge. In addition, the claim that the Self-Access Pair Learning approach is heavily focus on form is based on Ross's analysis (Ross, 1992). There was no detailed analysis of the content of classroom instruction for the Self-Access Pair Learning group in this study. Nevertheless, it is highly likely that the instruction in the story-telling/self-selected reading class contained far more comprehensible input, and far less form-focused instruction than the Self-Access Pair Learning classes.

It is tempting to conclude from this data that comprehension-based instruction is much more efficient than traditional instruction, a finding that agrees with previous efficiency analyses (Mason, 2004; Mason and Krashen, 2004): Students who experienced one hour per week of comprehension-based instruction progressed at several times the rate as those who had one hour of comprehension-based instruction and six hours of traditional instruction.

Comparing one hour per week of comprehension-based instruction to several hours of similar instruction could, however, produce the same results. In other words, it may be the case that after a certain point, instruction of any kind is less efficient.

The differences in efficiency are so large, however, that it is doubtful that the diminishing returns seen here is due entirely to instructional fatigue. The extra form-focused instruction may not have been worth it.

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