From Pun to Plot: Remembering and Forgetting in Story-Listening versus List-Learning

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Abstract: This experiment compared Story-Listening (SL) and List-Learning (LL) in terms of vocabulary retention and forgetting among Japanese seventh graders (N = 77-81). SL is an input-only approach grounded in the Optimal Input Hypothesis (Krashen & Mason, 2020), in which stories are delivered through Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation (CAS). LL is a conventional method of rote memorization, often relying on mnemonics such as puns. Across conditions, learners completed a pretest, an immediate post-test, and a delayed post-test. In LL, participants studied 40 textbook words for 20 minutes and were tested one week later. In SL, participants listened to *The Wonder Tree* (31 minutes, 40 items), with the delayed post-test administered after two weeks. Both methods produced significant gains (SL: $t = 9.369$, $df = 76$, $p < .0001$; LL: $t = 11.419$, $df = 80$, $p < .0001$), yet their durability differed. LL exceeded SL in immediate gains but showed a higher forgetting rate (55% after one week). SL, by contrast, maintained lower forgetting (29% after two weeks). Remembering rates were 0.25 words per minute for LL (1-week delay) and 0.12 words per minute for SL (2-week delay). Simple projections suggest that, under realistic school schedules, SL yields comparable overall retention while imposing a lighter cognitive burden and providing richer linguistic exposure. Moreover, it is unrealistic to expect that learners could sustain the same level of effort, concentration, and enthusiasm required to memorize 40 isolated words each week as they did under controlled experimental conditions. These findings challenge the assumption that LL is more efficient: LL produces short-term success but decays rapidly, whereas SL offers a sustainable, input-centered path from **puns to plots**.

Keywords: Story-Listening; List-Learning; mnemonics; vocabulary retention; forgetting rate; Pure Optimal Input; junior high school.

INTRODUCTION

In Japan, many students study English for years yet continue to struggle to remember even basic words. This situation is not unique to Japan; similar challenges are common in other EFL contexts. Some readers may feel that their students perform better, but such impressions often come from special educational settings—prestigious universities or schools with selective admission, strong institutional support, or research funding. Since the introduction of compulsory education, we have moved from an era when schooling was reserved for the privileged to one where education is available to all. Yet, the reality remains that the highest-quality education is still unequally distributed. Many children from less advantaged backgrounds continue to receive limited opportunities for language learning and broader academic growth. Many teachers work in ordinary classrooms where students have little exposure to English and struggle despite their effort. It is these classrooms—and the teachers who serve them—that this study seeks to represent. For beginners, the challenge is especially severe when their mother tongue (L1) is not cognate with English. Almost every word is unfamiliar, grammar differs widely, and written conventions are distant from those of L1. Traditional approaches such as grammar–translation and list memorization promise shortcuts but typically yield only short-term gains. Decades of reliance on such methods have produced little durable progress.

Over forty years ago, Krashen's *Input Hypothesis* (1981, 1982, 1985) proposed a radically different view: language acquisition is distinct from language learning (*the Acquisition–Learning Hypothesis*). Language is acquired through comprehensible input, not through conscious study, drills, or correction (*the Monitor Hypothesis*). Abundant self-selected reading (*the Input Hypothesis*) can, for example, greatly expand vocabulary (Krashen, 1989). This principle has since been further clarified as *Pure Optimal Input* (POI; Krashen, 2020; Krashen & Mason, 2020; Mason & Krashen, 2020b; Mason, 2018), which emphasizes input that is comprehensible, compelling, rich, abundant, and non-targeted (Krashen, 2013). *Story-Listening* (SL; Mason & Krashen, 2020a; Krashen & Mason, 2022; Krashen, 2024; Truscott, 2025) operationalizes these principles by providing engaging, input-only sessions that avoid drills, error correction, and explicit instruction.

Some educators argue that explicit, conscious learning is needed to bridge the gap, for example, through error correction (Ferris, 1995). Others challenge this as a continuation of long-standing habits that offer little genuine choice (Truscott, 1999). From the POI perspective, such shortcuts are largely illusory: they may yield immediate results, but long-term proficiency does not follow.

This study examines beginning learners of English who lack both cognate advantages and prior exposure. Beginners were selected to test a common objection—that comprehensible input alone is insufficient at the outset and must be supported by conscious study.

Unlike studies with more advanced populations, the present experiment directly compares SL with conventional list learning (LL). This narrows the issue to the fundamental distinction between acquisition and learning: SL represents a pure input approach grounded in acquisition, while LL represents a conscious learning and memorization approach. The study evaluates which method is more effective in promoting vocabulary retention, reducing forgetting, and supporting sustainable classroom implementation.

Because the participants were near-beginners in English, two preliminary Story-Listening (SL) sessions were conducted to familiarize them with the procedure and minimize novelty effects. The third session was planned as the formal treatment. However, the results revealed that learners did not need prior practice; they made significant gains from the first session. This immediate effect directly refutes the common objection that comprehensible input alone cannot benefit true beginners. When we examined forgetting rates, however, we found that forgetting decreased across sessions: the second session showed less forgetting than the first, and the third still less, even after two weeks. Therefore, in the present report, we include only the results of the third experiment. Detailed results of the preliminary sessions are provided in the Notes section. [(6)]

Previous studies of first-year junior high school students (ages 12–13) have shown strong vocabulary acquisition rates from Story-Listening (Mason & Ae, 2021) and that continuous exposure to SL leads to greater learning gains than traditional instructional methods (Mason & Ae, 2023, 2024). In terms of forgetting, the forgetting rate among junior high school students with prior SL experience was 19% after two weeks, whereas for university students it was 38% after three weeks (Mason & Bucol, 2025).

Building on this evidence, the present study focuses on forgetting rates to examine the sustainability of vocabulary learning through List-Learning (LL) and Story-Listening (SL). It reexamines the distinction between implicit acquisition and explicit learning from a Pure

Optimal Input (POI) perspective, exploring whether SL supports not only immediate test performance but also sustained vocabulary acquisition over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary Acquisition Rates in Story-Listening

Over the past two decades, research has consistently shown that Story-Listening (SL) can lead to substantial vocabulary growth. Unlike traditional vocabulary instruction that relies on memorization, drills, comprehension checks, and error correction, SL provides input that is comprehensible, compelling, rich, and abundant—without explicit teaching or conscious study.

Early studies explored two versions of SL: one presenting only the story, and another adding form-focused activities afterward. Mason and Krashen (2004) found that the story-only group learned vocabulary more efficiently, suggesting that extra exercises were unnecessary. Clarke (2019, 2020) later replicated these results. However, these early studies were not fully "pure" in design, as they still included a conscious learning element: the target words were written as a list on the board before the story, and students had just taken the pretest on those same words. Knowing they were expected to learn those words blurred the line between subconscious acquisition and conscious learning. Such design choices reflected my own limited understanding at the time—I had not yet fully distinguished between the two processes or fully trusted the power of **pure optimal input**. Twenty years ago, I had not yet grasped Krashen's concept of **non-targeted optimal input** and its classroom implications.

Subsequent research refined SL to remove these elements, allowing clearer measurement of true acquisition rates. When tested one week after hearing a story, Asian university students showed **0.24 words per minute (wpm)** retention rate. (Mason, Smith, & Krashen, 2021). Comparable results have been reported in multiple contexts: **0.19 wpm** after two weeks and **0.21 wpm** after four weeks with Japanese junior-high students (Mason & Ae, 2021), and **0.25 wpm** after three weeks with Thai university students (Mason & Bucol, 2025).

A related long-term study compared two junior-high cohorts. One group (2022 graduates) followed a traditional list-learning (LL) program, memorizing 20 words each week with weekly vocabulary tests. The other group (2023 graduates) received the same grammar instruction but replaced LL with SL—no homework, memorization, or testing. Vocabulary test items were drawn from the textbooks. Initially, the LL group appeared to learn more words after four terms plus summer vacation (513.9 vs. 398.1). However, when time investment was considered, SL proved more efficient (2.24 words per hour vs. 1.81 words per hour; Mason & Ae, 2024). Moreover, the SL group likely acquired many words beyond the textbook lists, since stories naturally provide a wider range of vocabulary. These results suggest that while LL may yield higher short-term totals, SL produces greater efficiency and broader vocabulary development over time.

Although forgetting rates for SL have been calculated in previous studies (Mason & Bucol, 2025), no research to date has directly compared forgetting rates between SL and LL. The present study therefore examines both retention and forgetting in LL and compares them with SL to determine which method offers greater long-term benefits for learners.

Retention and Forgetting Rates

While Story-Listening (SL) has been shown to yield vocabulary gains, durability is essential. The key question, therefore, is how forgetting in SL compares with that in list-learning (LL), a meaning-assisted, item-by-item approach that often relies on mnemonic devices. By measuring delayed retention and calculating forgetting rates for both methods, this study evaluates their relative effectiveness in supporting long-term vocabulary growth. The next section describes the design used to estimate these rates.

STUDY

This study compares an input-only approach, Story-Listening (SL) implemented with Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation (Krashen, Mason, & Smith, 2018), which makes the input comprehensible, interesting, rich in quality, and abundant in quantity, against a meaning-assisted list-learning (LL) routine on two outcomes: delayed vocabulary retention and forgetting. The design, timing, and scoring are described below; participant characteristics appear in "Subjects."

Compliance with Research Ethics

School-level oversight was obtained: the headmaster was informed of the study and approved the instructional variations. Students were informed that their scores from the study would not impact their grades. Because the activities took place during regular lessons, participation was not optional. No written parental or guardian consent was obtained, and no study-specific explanations were provided to students or their parents before data collection. In view of the minimal risk and routine classroom context, school-level approval was deemed sufficient; however, we acknowledge this as a limitation and report it here for transparency.

To protect privacy, no identifying information was included in the analysis dataset, and results are reported only in aggregate form. No incentives or penalties were applied, and participation did not affect students' academic standing. No procedures likely to cause harm or distress were employed.

Research Questions

By focusing on beginning learners, this study examines which approach—an input-only method such as Story-Listening (SL) or a mixed method such as List-Learning (LL)—more effectively promotes both immediate and long-term vocabulary growth.

LL is referred to here as a *mixed* approach because it is not pure rote memorization. It often employs meaning-based techniques, such as puns or mnemonic stories, to link the sound of a foreign word with its meaning in the native language. In doing so, LL partially relies on comprehension rather than repetition alone. The theoretical distinction, therefore, lies in whether the learning process is pure—driven entirely by comprehensible input—or contaminated by conscious, form–meaning associations created through deliberate memory strategies.

The central question, therefore, is whether vocabulary acquired through pure comprehensible input (SL) endures longer and remains more durable over time than vocabulary learned

through mixed, mnemonic-based methods (LL). Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

1. How do SL and LL differ in vocabulary retention rates?
2. How do SL and LL differ in vocabulary forgetting rates?
3. Based on the observed retention and forgetting rates, how many words are students expected to retain after approximately 200 and 400 hours of exposure to each method?

In addition to these empirical questions, the study also considers a practical issue, informed by broader classroom experience: *Which method is more manageable and less burdensome for students in real educational settings?*

Subjects

Participants were 7th-grade students at a public junior high school in Japan. The study was conducted in June 2023, roughly two months after students entered junior high school in April. Across sessions, sample sizes ranged from 77 to 81.

Students had begun formal English in Grade 4, for approximately 160–180 class periods (45–50 minutes each) over three years (one class per week in Grade 4; two per week in Grades 5–6). By the start of this study, they had completed eight weeks of Grade-7 English using a standard first-year textbook.

Proficiency was monitored through classroom observations (April–June). The second author, who has taught at the school for over ten years, judged this cohort's overall academic performance to be lower than that of prior cohorts, based on classroom behavior, test results, and homework completion.

A common concern about earlier SL research is that many participants were college students with six years of prior, form-focused instruction. To address this, the present study targeted beginners with limited prior English experience, allowing a stricter test of SL in an EFL context with no cognate advantages.

Rationale and Design

This study conducted a controlled comparison with 12–13-year-old beginners learning a language completely unrelated to their native tongue (Japanese → English). These students were accustomed to deliberate learning routines—such as memorizing definitions in science, formulas in mathematics, and facts in social studies—but had never experienced listening to a story told entirely in English for 20–30 minutes simply for comprehension.

We contrasted a **pure optimal input approach** (Story-Listening, SL/POI) with the familiar **list-learning method** (LL). If SL demonstrated a lasting advantage under these conservative conditions, it would constitute strong evidence of its effectiveness.

Two short stories were used in the first two SL sessions to help students become familiar with the new format. When retention rates for these practice sessions reached 0.24 and 0.21 words per minute after one week, we decided to increase the challenge for the third story. In the main session, students heard a longer and more complex story. The pretest was

administered one week before the SL session, and the delayed post-test was given two weeks later, rather than one week as in the LL condition. This design tested whether SL could still compete with LL in both retention and forgetting rates under more demanding circumstances.

This approach also provides a **lower-bound estimate** of SL effectiveness: it represents the minimum performance expected under difficult conditions and likely underestimates what could be achieved in contexts where learners' first language is more closely related to English.

Although contexts differ, many EFL classrooms share three common constraints:

1. Students' first languages, especially in Asia, are not cognate with English.
2. Learners have limited time and low tolerance for heavy, skill-based study.
3. Most cohorts begin at a novice level.

Findings under these conditions, therefore, apply to a wide range of classrooms, even if they do not claim universality. Nonetheless, I have heard from teachers of Spanish, French, German, Latin, and even American Sign Language—mostly in the United States and Europe—that Story-Listening also works effectively with their students.

Independent Variables and Procedure

This study compared two instructional conditions for vocabulary acquisition and retention:

1) List-Learning (LL)

A traditional, form-focused routine in which students study isolated vocabulary items through repeated oral and written drills accompanied by Japanese translations. Students were already familiar with this approach from elementary school, where they memorized sets of words such as animal names and family members in English, as well as from other subjects requiring similar rote memorization.

As described earlier, LL is considered a *mixed* method because it is not purely mechanical. It incorporates meaning-based elements, such as the use of puns or associative stories, to help learners remember words. In this sense, LL combines aspects of both conscious form–meaning connection and deliberate repetition.

LL procedure.

Forty English words were randomly selected from the Grade 7 textbook. In the pretest, the teacher read each word aloud once, and students supplied the Japanese translation, ensuring recognition even if spelling was unfamiliar. Students then received a printed list with the correct translations and were given 20 minutes to memorize it, either individually or with peers, using any preferred strategy (including mnemonic devices such as puns; cf. Mason, Ae, & Krashen, 2022). An immediate post-test followed, and a delayed post-test was administered one week later. At each administration, the items were presented in randomized order, and the teacher read each item aloud. All tests were scored by the classroom teacher (second author).

2) Story-Listening (SL)

An input-only approach grounded in the Pure Optimal Input (POI) framework, which operationalizes the Optimal Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 2020; Krashen & Mason, 2020). SL presents stories entirely in English with no translation, pre-teaching, comprehension questions, drills, or forced output. To keep input comprehensible and compelling, the teacher employed Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation (CAS)—drawings, gestures, facial expressions, board work, and occasional high-probability synonyms.

Unlike LL, participants had no prior sustained classroom experience with SL, apart from two short familiarization sessions immediately before the study.

SL Procedure

Two short SL sessions were first conducted for practice, using *The Little Frog with the Big Mouth* (12 minutes) and *The Goose and the Golden Egg* (17 minutes). Each session included a pretest, an immediate post-test, and a delayed post-test administered 7–9 days later. Target items were drawn directly from the stories ($k = 35$ and $k = 38$). At each test point, the teacher read each English item aloud once, and students provided the Japanese translation. Detailed results for these practice sessions are presented in the Notes section (Note 6).

The third and main SL session served as the formal treatment. *The Wonder Tree* was a longer and more emotionally engaging story. Although the session was originally planned to last 20 minutes, it extended to 31 minutes even after minor simplification (one scene omitted). The test contained 40 target items ($k = 40$) drawn directly from the story.

The pretest was administered one week before the SL session, and the delayed post-test was given two weeks later without prior notice. These longer intervals were chosen for two reasons: first, participants had already completed two prior SL sessions, and we did not want them to anticipate a delayed post-test the following week; second, we wished to impose a more demanding condition to test the durability of SL outcomes. Although students were unaware that the earlier sessions served as practice, this schedule provided a stricter and more conservative test of long-term retention, reflecting our expectation—based on earlier studies—that SL would continue to yield strong remembering rates even under less favorable circumstances.

The results from *The Wonder Tree* were compared with those from the LL condition. Thus, the comparison reflects the outcomes of realistic classroom implementation rather than narrowly controlled laboratory conditions.

Results

1) Retention rates (SL vs. LL)

Paired t-tests showed significant gains from pretest to delayed posttest for both Story-Listening (SL) and List-Learning (LL) (SL: $t = 9.369$, $p < .0001$; LL: $t = 11.419$, $p < .0001$). We define the remembering rate as delayed gain per minute of exposure (words per minute; wpm).

- **SL** (The Wonder Tree): 0.12 wpm at a 2-week delay.
- **LL**: 0.25 wpm at a 1-week delay.

Table 1. Story-Listening: The Wonder Tree (31 minutes), N=77

	Pretest (6/16/2023)	Post-test (6/23/2023)	Delayed (7/7/2023) *
Mean (SD)	15.25 (5.79)	20.55 (7.95)	19.04 (7.51)
Gain	-	5.3	3.79
wpm	-	0.17	0.12
Paired *t*	-	-	t=9.369, df=76, p=0.0001

* k = 40 items. Pretest one week before the SL session; delayed post-test two weeks after the posttest.

Table 2. List Learning (20 minutes) N=81

	Pretest (6/20/2023)	Posttest (6/20/2023)	Delayed (6/29/2023) *
Mean (SD)	7.73 (6.58)	18.86 (10.92)	12.80 (9.14)
Gain		11.13	5.07
wpm		0.56	0.25
Paired *t*			t=11.419, df=80, p=0.0001

* k = 40 items. Delayed post-test one week after the same-day pre/post administration.

Detailed results for *The Wonder Tree* (SL) and LL are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Retention Rates by Condition (Remembering Rates, wpm)

Condition	Story / Item Set	Length (min)	Delay	k (items)	Remembering Rate (wpm)
Story-Listening (SL)	*The Wonder Tree*	31	2 weeks	40	0.12
List-Learning (LL)	Isolated words	20	1 week	40	0.25

2) Forgetting rates

Notably, even though the third SL story (*The Wonder Tree*) was longer and more complex, its forgetting rate was 29% after a two-week delay (Table 4). By contrast, the LL condition showed a forgetting rate of 55% after just one week (Table 4). Forgetting rates were calculated following Thalheimer's model. [7]

Table 4. Forgetting Rates

Method (N)	Delay Interval	Time on Task	Forgetting rate
The Wonder Tree (N=77)	2 weeks	31 min	29%
List-Learning (N=81)	1 week	20 min	55%

3) Estimated vocabulary retention after extended exposure

Assuming four 50-minute English periods per week over 40 weeks, students receive roughly 400 hours of instruction across three years. If classes meet twice a week on the same schedule, the total comes to about 200 hours.

Assumptions. LL has a learning efficiency of 0.25 words per minute, but after one week, the forgetting rate is 55%. SL has an acquisition rate of .12 words per minute but it is after two weeks. Even when it was tested after two weeks the SL forgetting rate is 29% and lower than the list learning method. In actual classrooms, SL is conducted at least once a week—often more frequently, as in junior high schools where English meets four times a week. The one-week gap we used for the delayed post-test is therefore already longer than what most students experience in practice. This means our estimates are conservative: they likely

understate the gains students would achieve when SL sessions occur more often and with less time to forget.

Table 5. Vocabulary Retention Estimates Under Two Exposure Schedules (200/400 hours)

Method	Acquisition Rate (wpm)	Forgetting Rate	Total Exposure	Words Acquired	Words Forgotten	Words Retained
SL every class	0.12	29%	400 hrs (24,000 min)	2,880	835	2,045
SL twice a week	0.12	29%	200 hrs (12,000 min)	1,440	418	1,022
LL every class	0.25	55%	400 hrs (24,000 min)	6,000	3,300	2,700
LL twice a week	0.25	55%	200 hrs (12,000 min)	3,000	1,650	1,350

(4) Lower Forgetting Despite Longer Delay
Despite the longer input time (31 minutes) and a stricter two-week delay, *The Wonder Tree* showed only **29% forgetting**, compared to **55%** for List-Learning (LL) after just one week. This finding demonstrates that when input is **optimal and non-targeted**, vocabulary retention remains strong—even when the story is longer, more complex, and tested after a longer interval.

DISCUSSION

Although Table 3 appears to show that List-Learning (LL) yields higher vocabulary gains, this estimate assumes that Story-Listening (SL) sessions occur only once every two weeks. In actual classroom practice, SL is typically conducted more frequently, often several times per week. Moreover, it is unrealistic to expect that learners would maintain the same level of effort, concentrtion, and enthusiasm required to memorize 40 isolated words each week as they did under controlled experimental conditions. The LL estimates therefore represent an idealized upper bound under intensive short-term effort, whereas the SL figures reflect a more sustainable, long-term approach consistent with real classroom conditions.

Regarding manageability, SL, supported by CAS, ensures comprehension and sustains attention; students do not need to create mnemonics. The teacher, as a teller, handles the work of making input comprehensible and engaging. In contrast, creating puns for unknown words and attempting to memorize both the meaning and form can be tedious, effortful, and often boring for students. The sections below summarize ten implications of these findings.

Broader Implications of Story-Listening and the Comprehension Theory

The implications of this study extend beyond the present findings. Story-Listening, grounded in the Comprehension Theory, illustrates *why* listening to stories leads not only to vocabulary development but also to language acquisition as a whole. According to the theory, language develops when learners receive input that is both comprehensible and compelling. Story-Listening provides exactly this condition: learners focus on understanding messages rather than memorizing forms. As they follow a story, their attention is naturally drawn to meaning through sound, image, and emotion. Words and structures are acquired incidentally, in context, and gradually become part of an internal language system. Thus, it may be inferred

that the effectiveness of Story-Listening lies not in practice or repetition, but in the brain's natural tendency to acquire language through comprehension.

- **Reducing Student Burden.**

Meeting vocabulary targets for high school and university entrance exams often pushes classrooms toward weekly memorization cycles. This emphasis shifts students' effort toward short-term list performance rather than durable acquisition. In Story-Listening (SL), however, the teacher uses Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation (CAS) to make stories comprehensible, allowing vocabulary to be encountered and reinforced naturally. Over approximately 200 hours of SL (12,000 minutes), students can listen to over 400 stories during their junior high school years. Words recur across different contexts, providing built-in review and consolidation—without the need for cramming.

- **SL as a Pathway to Reading**

Story-Listening (SL) provides syntax, discourse patterns, and vocabulary within meaningful, engaging contexts, building the receptive foundation that makes reading attainable. This sequence parallels first-language development—comprehension first, production later. A solid base in listening comprehension enables learners to transition naturally and curiously into independent reading.

- **Vocabulary Growth Through Context**

Because Story-Listening (SL) provides rich and abundant input—not limited to textbook word lists—learners naturally hear a wide range of vocabulary, including common, mid-level, and even less frequent words. Hearing these words in meaningful stories helps students connect sound and meaning more deeply, so they can recognize and remember them later in both listening and reading. The teacher's use of drawings, gestures, and explanations (Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation, or CAS) makes these connections even stronger. When words appear again in new stories or different situations, learners build flexible understanding and lasting memory.

- **Engagement and Attention**

Compelling narratives, supported by CAS, sustain attention and draw learners so deeply into the story that the classroom setting itself fades into the background. The topic, content, and flow of the story—when made comprehensible—remove barriers and allow the input to enter naturally.

- **A Continuous Support to Independent Reading**

A Story-Listening (SL) sequence can begin with simple Aesop fables and folktales, then move on to Grimm and Lang collections, and later to short stories or accessible Shakespeare retellings. Over the course of several terms, students may experience hundreds of stories, gradually building the understanding and confidence needed for independent reading. In this way, SL becomes not only a guided bridge from listening to literacy but also a steady source of support for long-term literacy development.

- **High Comprehension Without Conscious Learning**

Story-Listening (SL) removes performance pressure: there is no pre-teaching of vocabulary or grammar, no output activities, and no drills, tests, or error correction. Within the Pure Optimal Input (POI) framework, this low-stress, meaning-centered environment keeps barriers low and allows learners to absorb language naturally, at their own readiness. As Truscott (1996, 1999) argued in L2 writing, error-focused instruction often proves ineffective and demotivating. The same principle applies here—acquisition is most successful when comprehension and engagement are prioritized over deliberate memorization and correction.

- **Fostering a Reading Habit Within Limited School Time**

Within approximately 400 scheduled hours across three years (4×50-minute lessons per week, 40 weeks/year), a realistic program could include: (a) regular SL, one story per class,

four days a week; (b) Guided Self-Selected Reading (GSSR) for 20–30 minutes on most days, with teacher support for level-appropriate texts; and (c) steady vocabulary growth from contextual input rather than lists. Evidence from adult learners shows that sustained SL/GSSR can lead to lifelong independent reading habits (Mason, 2025). By analogy, a junior high school program built on the same principles has the potential to foster independent reading by graduation—delivering durable vocabulary gains in the thousands, alongside improved listening fluency, enhanced syntactic sensitivity, and increased confidence.

- **Overcoming Reading Barriers**

Many EFL learners do not read enough to benefit from reading in English (Cobb, 2008). It is correct in noting that students rarely read extensively, but mistaken in concluding that incidental vocabulary growth through reading is therefore inadequate (Nation, 2014). The real issue is that teachers often lack effective ways to help students *begin* and *sustain* a reading habit. Reading can be demanding, but listening—when supported by Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation (CAS)—is easier to follow and immediately rewarding. Story-Listening provides this essential bridge: by helping learners develop listening skills and developing a good vocabulary size to start reading. As learners' listening competence grows and their interest in stories is awakened, they naturally begin to read voluntarily, drawn by curiosity even if some fear remains that reading in English may be too difficult.

- **The Role of Mental Imagery**

Learners often report that they form vivid mental images while listening, supported by the teacher's drawings, gestures, and expressions. Neuroscientist and neuropsychologist **Dr. Atsushi Yamadori** (2021) notes that understanding begins with perception—the brain links what we see, hear, and feel with past experiences through neural connections. It seems plausible that Story-Listening draws on these same natural processes to integrate meaning with language, strengthening memory and making vocabulary more durable. In this way, SL may engage both **cognitive understanding** and **emotional resonance**, allowing language to take root more deeply and endure over time.

- **If Meaning Does the Work, Why Memorize**?

The apparent effectiveness of List-Learning (LL) in this study comes primarily from *meaning-based strategies* such as puns (語呂合わせ), not from pure rote memorization. But if it is meaning that does the real work of memory, we must ask why the memorization layer is needed at all. Story-Listening provides meaningful input directly—rich, connected, and emotionally engaging—without the added cognitive burden of inventing mnemonics. It delivers language through continuous, comprehensible discourse, allowing words to be remembered naturally for the same reason we remember stories themselves: because they mean something to us.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This study focused on short-term retention and forgetting rates under controlled classroom conditions with junior high school beginners. Future research could extend these findings by examining longer-term outcomes, other age groups, and additional languages. Such studies would help confirm whether the advantages of Story-Listening observed here generalize across broader contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study compared Story-Listening (SL), an input-only, optimal-input approach, with List-Learning (LL) in a junior-high EFL context. Both methods produced measurable gains, but their durability diverged: LL showed rapid loss (55% forgetting), while SL retained more (29%) even with a longer, more complex story and a stricter two-week delay. These findings, consistent with prior longitudinal results, indicate that an SL-centered curriculum—connected with Guided Self-Selected Reading—can achieve vocabulary growth more sustainably and with less cognitive load than memorization-based routines. Conscious study may remain a limited option for exam preparation, but it need not drive instruction. A Pure Optimal Input (POI) program thus offers a practical and coherent path for lasting language development—a shift from **pun to plot**, and from effortful memorization to natural acquisition.

NOTES

(1) The junior high school teacher (the second author) experimented with the first author's direction in this study. The first author wrote the entire paper.

(2) The recommended number of English words to know before entering high school ranges from 2,200 to 2,400." https://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2019/03/18/1387018_010.pdf

(3) Pure-Optimal-Input means that the language input the teacher provides students contains optimal input for the group of students the teacher is talking to. The conscious learning activities (extra additives) are deleted from the method, and thus, optimal input is pure. "Optimal Input" means the input is not only comprehensible and interesting, but also rich in quality and quantity.

(4) The Little Frog with the Big Mouth: https://easystoriesinenglish.com/frog2/
The Goose and the Golden Egg: https://read.gov/aesop/091.html
The Wonder Tree: Asian Pacific Folktales and Legends (Ed. J. Faurot), pages 136-137. NY: Touchstone.

(5) Mnemonic devices記憶術：https://www.manavis.com/mana_magazine/junior-high-school-english-words/
https://atsueigo.com/vocabulary/ https://resemom.jp/mitsukaru-eikaiwa/memorize-english-words

(6) The list of the words used for the frog test: little, frog, big, mouth, look at, bowl, flies, said, tired of eating flies, eat, breakfast, morning, lunch, at noon, evening, something else, jumped, went to a farm, saw, an animal, who are you, asked, hen, answered, what do you eat? worms, you want to try? Another animal, horse, hay, pig, shoes, snake, ate, in one gulp (k=35)
The list of the words used for the goose test: goose, golden egg, farmer, small, farm, eight, cows, four, geese, visited, nest, the large goose, laid, beautiful, glittering, picked up, geese, took, market, sold, got, a lot of money, every morning, the biggest goose, went, greedy, impatient, couldn't wait, wanted, lay, give, every day, idea, knife, cut, stomach, open, find (k=38)
The list of the words used for the List learning test: ceremony, vacation, evening, twelfth, technology, life, watch, station, thirsty, pray, learn, taste, thick, put, wallet, cheerful, remember, street, draw, picture, exited, instrument, place, use, we, fiction, climb far, activity, trick, thank, hear, low, plan, weak, different, bring, visit, bought, a lot (k=40).
The words on "The Wonder Tree" from "Asian Pacific Folktale and Legends (Ed. Jeannette L. Faurot). A Touchstone Book, (pages 136-137): New York: Simon & Schuster. The test was presented in three different formats, each with a different word order. orphan, empty, sister, surprised, parents, give, small house, lend, hungry, whisper, money, ask, poor, got angry, uncle, killed, help, afternoon, found, nieces, bird, sad, brought, cried, basket, lost, lay, gathered the bones, morning, buried, uncooked rice, garden, happy, tree, ate, grew, cooked rice, blossoms, eat, diamonds (k=40).

Short Story-Listening 1: The Little Frog with the Big Mouth (12 minutes) Remembering Rate after 1 week

N=88	Pretest (6/6/2023)	Posttest (6/6/2023)	Delayed (6/13/2023)
Mean (SD)	13.93 (5.70)	19.39 (7.95)	16.80 (7.31)
Gain		5.46	2.87
Words per Minute Rate		0.46	0.24
Forgetting %			51%
Paired t-test			t=8.5564, p=0.0001

Short Story-Listening 2: The Goose and the Golden Egg (17 minutes) Remembering Rate after 1 week

N=55	Pretest (6/9/2023)	Posttest (6/9/2023)	Delayed (6/16/2023)
Mean (SD)	10.64 (4.76)	16.13 (6.63)	14.25 (6.29)
Gain		5.49	3.61
Words per Minute Rate		0.32	0.21
Forgetting %			35%
Paired t-test			t=9.7742, p=0.0001

(7) Forgetting rate (Thalheimer). Amout of Forgetting % = (Original correct % - Remembering Correct %) / Original Correct %. (© 2010 Will Thalheimer)
(8) The number of hours for English studies at a junior high school: https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20210629-mxt_kyoiku01-000016453_4.pdf

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