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It is reasonable to propose that a goal of language programs is to make students "autonomous," that is, able to improve their competence in their second language on their own. An obvious way to do this is to introduce students to free voluntary reading, a pleasurable activity that students can certainly do on their own, and that has been shown to have powerful payoffs in increased proficiency in all aspects of literacy (Krashen, 2004). This paper reports an attempt to do this: Students who had completed classes in which they were involved in free voluntary reading of graded readers were encouraged to continue reading on their own in preparation for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Previous research strongly suggests that reading would be good preparation for the TOEFL. One case study (Constantino, 1995) and two multivariate correlational studies (Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Constantino, SY Lee, KS Cho, and Krashen, 1997) have shown that the amount of recreational reading students do is a strong predictor of TOEFL performance.

Showing that just engaging in independent reading improves scores on the TOEFL examination would have strong implications for both theory and practice. On the level of theory, it would confirm that language acquisition is possible from comprehensible input (in this case reading) alone. On the level of practice, it would tell us whether independent study is a viable and practical means of preparing for the TOEFL examination, especially if we can compare students' progress with those who prepare for the TOEFL examination in more traditional ways.

PROCEDURE

Subjects were six university level students of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan. All had taken EFL courses that had emphasized extensive reading of graded readers, books written especially for EFL students. The classes the readers took before starting the independent reading program included presentation of the theory underlying extensive reading, some of the actual research supporting extensive reading, and a great deal of reading experience.

All reading in the EFL classes was selected by the students, who had access to a library of about 4000 graded readers (about 700 different titles). Students were advised to begin with very easy graded readers, and read about 70 to 100 pages per week. Accountability was minimal: No book report or summary was required and students were only asked to keep a record of the books they had read. Students were encouraged to read those books that were interesting to them, and were not required to finish every book they started. Class-time also included listening to stories.

All subjects volunteered to continue reading on their own, three during their summer vacation, two during the spring break, and one during the academic year (an Arabic major who was taking no English classes at the time). The readers were entirely on their own during this time; they did not meet with the researcher to discuss progress, problems, book selection, etc.. All were highly motivated to improve on the TOEFL and were told that reading was an excellent way to do this.

The procedure was simple. Students were given access to the library of graded readers that had been available to them during their classes. In contrast to reading done as part of the classes they took, readers were not asked to keep any records of how much or what they read, although some did so. The instrument used was the ITP (Institutional Testing Program) TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). This test was constructed from previously administered TOEFL tests, and is available from the Educational Testing

Service for local use for institutions for placement, awarding credit, as a final exam, etc.. It consists of three parts, Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading. Test administration takes about two hours, and multiple forms are available. Reliability of the TOEFL is very high (for the ITP-TOEFL, total reliability = .95; listening comprehension = .90; structure = .87, reading = .88; TOEFL, 2005). (Note: A TOEFL score of 550 is thought to represent enough English competence to study in an American university.)

RESULTS

Table 1 presents gains made by each subject for each component of the TOEFL, as well as weeks spent reading and the average gain per week. The average gain per student was 3.5 points per week.

Table 1: *Gains made by students*

Name	Test date	Listen	Grammar	Reading	*Total	Gain	Weeks	**Pts/Wk
Noriko	1/17/01	51	44	41	453			
	4/6/01	51	52	47	500	47	11 wks	4.2
Sumiyo	1/22/03	46	44	42	440			
	4/5/03	50	49	44	477	37	10 wks	3.7
Yoko	7/12/03	44	45	48	457			
	8/6/03	46	49	50	477	20	3.5 wks	5.7
U	7/12/03	46	51	47	480			
	10/25/03	49	50	55	513	33	15 wks	2.2
Yu	7/12/03	44	42	46	440			
	10/25/03	46	44	51	470	30	15 wks	2
Kenji	3/31/05	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	467			
	6/10/05	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	500	33	10 wks	3.3

*Total TOEFL scores are arrived at by calculating the mean of the three components and multiplying by ten: eg, $51 + 44 + 41 = 136/3 = 45.3 * 10 = 453$.

**The calculation of points per week may over-estimate the amount of reading done per week because the time period included, in four cases of out six, the final two weeks of the semester during which final examinations were administered. n.a. = not available

It was not possible to calculate the amount gained per page for all subjects, as only three subjects provided information necessary for this calculation. Yoko reported reading 300 pages, and gained 20 points, a gain of about 1 point for each 15 pages read, and U read 1300 pages, gaining 33 points, a gain of about 1 point for

each 40 pages read. Kenji reported that he focused exclusively on the work of Sidney Sheldon and read up to 200 pages per day.

Using U's report as an example, the results are encouraging. If 40 pages results in a one point gain, a student can expect a gain of 100 points by reading 4000 pages, about 40 books.

We can get some idea of the efficiency of free reading by comparing these results to the progress made by students in a study-abroad, TOEFL preparation program. Swinton (1983) studied the improvements made by international students in a traditionally taught intensive Academic English program at a university in the United States. Students were in class four hours per day for five days a week and had two to three hours of homework per day, or about 30 hours per week of study, which amounts to about 390 hours over the 13 week program. In addition, they had access to additional English input in the US in their everyday life.

Table 2, from Swinton's table 4, presents average pre and post-test scores on the TOEFL test for students in his program. Those with beginning TOEFL scores of 401 to 450 gained 52.3 points, or 4 points per week. Those with beginning TOEFL scores of 451 to 500 gained 42.1 or 3.2 points per week. The readers in the extensive reading study described here gained 3.51 points per week, results that are nearly identical to those of Swinton's students, spending, most likely, far less time, and certainly less money.

Table 2: *Average Pre-and Posttest Scores by IEP students in the US*

Pretest range	251-300	301-350	351-400	401-450	451-500	501-550	551-600	601-650
Pretest Mean	293.5	327.8	379.5	426.2	469.5	523.5	557	613
Posttest Mean	385	384	441.1	478.5	511.6	570	603	583
Gain	91.5	56.2	61.6	52.3	42.1	46.5	46	-30

From Table 4 in Swinton (1983), p. 10

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The subjects in this study were well-educated, experienced language students, were highly motivated, and volunteered to engage in the reading program. It is thus inappropriate to generalize these results to all language students. The results of this study confirm, however, that it is possible to improve in a second language from input/reading alone, and that the benefits of reading extend to vocabulary and grammar. The results also suggest that at least some students can prepare quite well for the TOEFL in their own country. Finally, the results suggest that the courses these students took succeeded in making them autonomous language acquirers. To confirm that this is so, we need to investigate whether these students turn to reading on their own in the future to improve their English.

References

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