

American Students' Vocabulary Acquisition Rate in Japanese as a Foreign Language from Listening to a Story

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Abstract: The positive effects of listening to stories on second language development have been widely reported. In this study we investigated the rate of vocabulary acquisition by American high school students of Japanese-as-a-foreign-language from listening to a story told in Japanese just once. The rate was .17 words per minute, very similar to the rate reported for students in Japan acquiring English and German who also listened to a story just once.

Keywords: *Story-Listening, second language acquisition, vocabulary development.*

1. Introduction

Studies have shown that listening to stories can result in improvement in listening, reading, speaking, writing, imagination, and vocabulary (Ackerman, 1994; Hemmati, Gholamrezapour & Hessamy, 2015; Huang, 2006; Kalfus & Van Der Schyff, 1996; Lie, 1994; Mallan, 1996; McQuillan & Tse 1998; Wang & Lee, 2007).

In this study we report on the rate of vocabulary acquisition from only one exposure to listening to a story. It has been debated how effective and efficient it is to have students just exposed to input in L2. Many argue that input alone cannot be sufficient and therefore we need both input and skill-based direct learning. We believe that it is interesting to find out how far we can stretch the idea of the input alone approach (Krashen, 1981; 1982).

Native speaker children's rate of vocabulary acquisition from reading has been estimated to be 1000 words per year, at the rate of 0.25 words per minute (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). Studies conducted with college students acquiring a foreign language have produced similar results from listening to stories. Students taking an English as a foreign language course in Japan listened to stories containing unknown words. Five to seven weeks after the treatment,

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delayed post-test results indicated the subjects acquired between .10 to .25 words per minute (Mason, 2005; Mason & Krashen, 2004). Consistent findings were found with students of German as a foreign language in Japan (Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009).

The purpose of this experiment was to replicate previous studies and examine whether a similar rate could be found using American students who were learning Japanese as a foreign language. A possible criticism is that for the Japanese subjects in the studies (Mason, 2005; Mason & Krashen, 2004), the subjects had been studying English for six years and therefore, Story-Listening cannot be concluded to be effective for beginners. In order to begin to answer that question, a study was done using students who were learning German as a second foreign language; these subjects had had no exposure to German before they entered the University, and they had no exposure to German outside of the classroom. They had studied German in the university, but classes were very traditional, with very little comprehensible input. These German vocabulary studies demonstrated similar rates. The number of subjects in the study, however, was small (Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009).

This study used 21 American high school students in Denver, Colorado, who were taking a Japanese language course. The story they heard was a Japanese folk tale, and it was told only one time for 20 minutes. Participants were enrolled in a class comprised of both third and fourth year students of Japanese. They heard a story for 20 minutes and their retention of the meaning of the words used in the story was tested after five weeks.

The class was a traditionally taught Japanese class, taught by a Japanese teacher using a textbook, who taught the class partly in Japanese and partly in English. The story told to the class was "The Carpenter and a Cat." This was the first time students heard a story told in Japanese. It was told by the first author.

The Story

A Japanese carpenter lost his wife and then found a cat. He bought a fish every day and brought it home to the cat. The cat waited for his return every night on a bridge above a river near their home. They lived together happily. One day the carpenter got very sick and became blind. He could no longer work. He apologized to the cat and told her that he was sorry that he could not bring her a fish every night anymore. Then the cat started licking the carpenter's eyes day and night, every day and all day. After seven days, his eyes opened and he could see. He was very happy. He could go back to work and buy a fish for the cat. But, now the cat became blind. The next day he told the cat that he would bring a fish home for her, and he left for work. On the way home he bought two fish and rushed home happily to meet the cat, but the cat was not waiting for him at the bridge. The cat was gone and he could not find her anymore. The carpenter set up a Buddhist altar, and brought a fish home as an offering every night. Every night for a long time he told the cat what had happened that day in front of the altar.

2. Procedure

The investigator told the story in the style known as Story-Listening. She made a list of 38 words as a prompt to remind her which words were to be included, in order to introduce new words for the students and also to make the story rich and interesting. The students might have known some words already, but some words were clearly unknown to the students (Appendix).

When one of these 38 words came up while she was telling the story, she paused, and illustrated the meaning of the new word using drawings or gestures with facial expressions, and using the students' first language (English). At no time did she tell the students that they were responsible for remembering the words; rather, the goal was to have the students enjoy the story,

although some of the students may have tried to memorize the new words. (For additional description of Story-Listening, see Mason, 2005; Mason & Krashen, 2004; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009).

Three tests were administered: A pre-test just before the students heard the story, a post-test immediately after hearing the story, and a delayed post-test five weeks after hearing the story. Students were not told that there would be a delayed post-test.

The format for all three tests was the same: students were simply asked to write an English translation for each word. Before the 3rd second test, there was a brief review of the targeted vocabulary. During this brief review, students were first shown cards with the targeted words written in Japanese in both Romanized and Japanese scripts. The instructor next read the word aloud in Japanese, pointed to a relevant drawing, and made gestures appropriate to the meaning the word. She concluded by asking the students to tell her the meaning of the words in English. In other words, the instructor reviewed the words that she used to tell the story with the students. This was done very quickly. Five weeks later they were given an unexpected delayed post-test. No review was done before the delayed test.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the results. Students made impressive gains on the immediate post-test, and retained about a third of this gain on the delayed post-test.

Table 1. Pre-test and post-test results.

| | Pretest 1/14 | Posttest 1/14 | Gain | Delayed Posttest 2/28 | Final Gain |
|-------------|--------------|---------------|------|-----------------------|-------------|
| Mean (S.D.) | 11.5 (6.5) | 27.4 (8.1) | 15.9 | 16.5 (8.0) | 5 |
| Rate | | | 0.53 | | 5/30 = 0.17 |

N = 21

Rate = words acquired per minute

To determine the efficiency of vocabulary acquisition from Story-Listening, the number of words gained was divided by the total time spent in the treatment, including the pre- and post-tests, and time spent before the post-test reviewing the targeted words, a total of 30 minutes. The result was .17 words gained per minute, a figure very close to the results of the studies reviewed in the introduction. When it was divided only by the actual time spent hearing the story the rate was .25 words per minute.

This means that if a teacher spends 20 to 30 minutes telling a story each period in a foreign language course for secondary schools in the US, assuming over 100 hours of instruction time, we can expect a gain of 500 words in one year with the 0.25 wpm rate. All students have to do is to listen to a story without homework.

This result gives us additional evidence that the vocabulary acquisition rate from listening to stories is somewhere between .10 to .25 depending on the level of the students, even when the languages are not related. This confirms that Story-Listening, when it is done consistently with stories that contain rich language, is a very promising method for vocabulary acquisition.

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