

TOEFL Preparation using Recreational Reading

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Can students prepare for the TOEFL just by doing recreational reading? I present here the results of a study that may have profound theoretical, practical and financial implications.

Previous research shows a clear correlation between the amount of reading students say that they have done and performance on the TOEFL: (Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Constantino, SY Lee, KS Cho, and Krashen, 1997; see also Constantino, 1995, for a suggestive case history).

Subjects were six university level students of English as a foreign language in Japan. All were aware of the “power of reading,” having taken courses from the author, and were enthusiastic participants in the study. This is, thus, a study that is “loaded for success”: Failure to achieve results with these subjects probably makes experimentation with less enthusiastic subjects unnecessary.

All students were interested in improving on the TOEFL, and all agreed to engage in free reading during a time when they had no other source of English input. Three read 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).

Students had access to a library of about 4000 graded readers (about 700 different titles), and were advised to begin with very easy graded readers, and read about 70 to 100 pages per week. Some students read the graded readers. Others read authors such as Sidney Sheldon, Paulo Coelho, Judy Blume, and Bertice Berry.

No book reports or summaries were required; students were only asked to keep a record of what they read. The readers were entirely on their own during this time; they did not meet with the researcher.

Students agreed to take versions of the TOEFL test available from the Educational Testing Service (TOEFL, 2005). These versions are constructed from previously administered tests and their reliability is high (total reliability = .95).

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, which is about the same as one achieves in intensive Academic English programs taught in the United States (Swinton, 1983).

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

Tom McCarthy noted an interesting phenomenon in table 1: The longer the students participated in the program, the fewer average points per week they gained. McCarthy's observation was confirmed: There is a nearly perfect correlation between gains and the duration of reading ($r = .95$). Clearly, we need to examine the actual reading behavior of the readers, so to determine if and why enthusiasm for reading wanes. The problem is that taking a closer look at readers' behavior might disrupt the process, and reduce the pleasure of reading. Unobtrusive means must be found. Before taking this step, however, simple replication of these results with other readers is called for.

The results of this study confirm that improving in a second language can take place from self-selected reading alone, and suggest that at least some students can prepare for the TOEFL through reading.

References

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