

When progress stops: The continuing saga of Mr. Tanaka

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Mr. Tanaka was a 43-year-old Japanese man who worked in the Radiology Department in a local hospital in Osaka, Japan. From January 2009 to January 2010, he read over 6456 pages of mostly graded readers in English and scored 655 on the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) in January 2010, gaining 180 points in one year starting from January 2009. He continued reading, but after 16 months his TOEIC score of May 2011 was almost the same as it was 16 months earlier (650). This paper presents Mr. Tanaka's reflections and discusses the possible reasons why progress stopped, which include the teacher's inexperienced suggestions as to how to guide a student at the intermediate level, as well as Mr. Tanaka's reluctance to completely trust the principles of free voluntary reading and unjustified faith in the traditional approach, which had betrayed him in the past and has done so again.

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Tanaka was a 43-year-old man who worked in the Radiology Department in a local hospital in Osaka, Japan. He graduated from a four-year vocational school in Radiology and began to work at the age of 21. After graduation, he did not study English until he was 40. I met Mr. Tanaka in 2008; he was the father of one of my private students. All parents were given some orientation about language acquisition and literacy development and were asked to read my book in Japanese, *FVR and Fairy/Folk Tale Listening* (Mason 2006a). In this way, Mr. Tanaka learned about the Reading Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985, 2003, 2004), and in July of 2008, he became interested in improving his English by reading for pleasure.

His reading and reading achievement can be divided into three periods (Table 1):

Period ONE: From July 2008 to January 2009 (6 months) Mr. Tanaka read 2,590 pages of graded readers in English Language. He took the TOEIC (in January 2009 and scored 475.

Period TWO: From February 2009 to January 2010 (One year), Mr. Tanaka read 6,456 pages, increasing his TOEIC score from 475 to 655, a gain of 180- points.

Period THREE: From February 2010 to May 2011: Mr. Tanaka continued to read graded readers and some authentic books for young adults (e.g. books in the Marvin Red post series written by Louis Sachar and books written by Judy Blume), as well as best-sellers (e.g. Twilight). He read newspapers and watched movies. At my suggestion, he had conversation sessions with a native speaker of English Language, which included correction of his errors in speaking.

Table 1 shows that Mr. Tanaka consistently read about 100 pages per week in periods I and II, until January 2010. This is the amount I usually suggest to my students, but he did not continue on this pace in period III.

Table 1: Gains on the TOEIC and pages read

Period	I	II	III
	July 2008 ~ January 2009	February 2009 ~ January 2010	February 2010 ~ May 2011
Length between Tests	6 months (24 weeks)	12 months (52 weeks)	16 months (64 weeks)
Pages read	2,590	6,456	2,515 (735) ^a
Pages read/week	107.9	124.2	39.3 (11.5)
TOEIC gain		180 (475-655)	-5 (655-650)
Total Score (L/R)		655(L330/R325)	650(L350/R300)

L = listening; R = reading

a; see text for discussion of the two figures presented here

A DISAPPOINTMENT

In May of 2011, Mr. Tanaka took the TOEIC test again, 16 months after the last TOEIC test. We expected that his score would go up, but it did not. It was 650, 5 points lower than before (Listening 350 and Reading 300). His reading score went down by 25 points. The following are his reflections on this result. (Written in Japanese, translated by B.M.)

“Regretfully the score did not change much from last year, maybe I am in a stagnation stage. I do not mean to make excuses, but I was not in the

best condition due to the lack of sleep the night before the test.

I was disturbed to find that my reading score went down this time. By the way, regarding vocabulary, there were no words that I did not understand on the test. I did not have enough time to finish the reading section of the test. I was 15 minutes short of time answering the questions. I experienced the same thing last time when I took the test. Next time, I might start answering the questions from the last page where the questions are more difficult.

I am not convinced of the result, so I will take the test again in the near future. I might have higher scores if I take a test-taking strategy course, but getting a high score is not my real goal. I wonder what the best thing is for me to do now. I am certain that I understood the reading questions better than before. Maybe I am not fast enough to finish the test. I wonder if that is because I am over 40 years old. I feel the limit of my intellectual ability. Is there anything else I can do? My goal is not to get good scores on the test as I am not a student anymore (although it would be great if I could get a high score). What I want is to understand messages in English, read magazines and books in English, and to tell you the truth, I really don't care about my reading speed either. But for that goal, I do need to increase my vocabulary size. Do you think it is a good idea to make a list and memorize words?"

Mr. Tanaka thought that the following might be the reasons for not improving on the test:

1. His reading speed is slow. (He did not have enough time to finish the test.)
2. He had not slept well the night before.
3. He feels limited in his intellectual ability because he is over 40 years old.

Mr. Tanaka is sure that he is better in English now than he was 16 months ago, because:

1. He understood all the words on the test.

2. He had a better understanding of the questions he read than before.

Mr. Tanaka feels that in order to improve on the test score, it may be a good idea to:

1. Take a test-taking strategy course.
2. Make a vocabulary list and memorize it.

Reactions based on the theory

The Optimal Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982, 2019; Sadeghi, 2020; Krashen & Mason, 2020) states that “Optimal” input must satisfy the following conditions: 1) comprehensible, 2) compelling, 3) rich, 4) abundant, and should not require student accountability via constant testing. Mr. Tanaka’s activities since April 2010 violate what we know about language acquisition (Krashen, 1982, 1985, 2003).

- 1) **Incomprehensible input:** In February 2010 Mr. Tanaka stopped taking a class which contained “Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading,” and began to take private lessons from a native speaker who emphasized reading the newspaper and watching movies that the teacher supplied. Although the content was interesting, the reading material was difficult.
- 2) **Forced Speech, Interaction, Comprehension Checking, and Corrective Feedback:** The lessons emphasized discussing content: During the lesson, Mr. Tanaka was regularly asked to read a short newspaper article out loud and was asked to give his opinions on what he had just read. When he watched a movie, the movie was stopped in places and he was asked comprehension questions. Then, the instructor responded to Mr. Tanaka and continued the conversation. The sessions lasted about two hours and there were 35- lessons during the 16 months.

Reduced amount of input. The amount of reading Mr. Tanaka reported for period III was 3,250 pages, consisting of 2515 pages (the Twilight series) and 735 pages from graded readers and Perfection Learning books, written by Anne Schraff ⁽¹⁾ for striving readers and written for the 3rd to 6th-grade reading levels. He understood these books well.

The 3250 figure for period III in Table 1 may be an overestimate. There were many words in Twilight he did not know, and he had to read and reread sections in order to understand them. The actual number of pages read and understood might have been as low as 725, the graded readers and Perfection Learning books. He said

he read Identity (Kundera) but did not finish it (176 pages), but we do not know how much of it he read and we do not know whether it was comprehensible.

- 3) **Conscious learning of vocabulary:** He said that he had used the dictionary and his iPod to memorize words but commented that memorizing words like this was boring.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

There are reports describing unsuccessful programs (e.g., Krashen, 2011; Mason, 2005). The reasons for the failure of these programs appear to be the same reasons that prevented Mr. Tanaka from improving:

- 1) The books that he read were too difficult (Lack of comprehensible input)
- 2) The books that he read were not interesting enough, so he did not finish them. (Lack of compelling input)
- 3) As he was forced to speak, his affective filter was high as he was monitoring his output with consciously learned rules.
- 4) There wasn't enough appropriate reading material. (Lack of abundant input)
- 5) There wasn't not enough input at the $i+1$ level (Lack of rich input).

Reflection on my wrong suggestions

In retrospect, the suggestion that I gave Mr. Tanaka ten years ago was wrong. I advised him to take an advanced listening/reading class with a native speaker for interaction and output practice. Forcing output, interaction, conscious attempts to learn difficult words, and corrective feedback did not seem to work. I thought that he was ready to leave the SL/GSSR program when he reached the TOEIC 655 level, but what he needed was more SL/GSSR until he reached 900.

This reminds me of some case histories, which showed that it is possible to gain significantly on the TOEFL when students receive optimal input. As long as the input is rich, interesting, and comprehensible, sometimes students do not even have to read 150 pages per week to make significant gains on the TOEFL (Mason, 2006). Mr. Tanaka should have continued to read more intermediate level graded readers for enjoyment instead of struggling through "Twilight." He should have continued to hear more folktales for enjoyment instead of watching movies that he had difficulty

understanding. He should have spent more time in the silent period instead of being forced to produce.

In fact, output and interaction might never be necessary. *Miyako*, my former student, reached TOEIC 975 from reading nearly the complete works of Agatha Christie (Mason, 2017). *Sawako*, another former student, did not gain much on the TOEIC after living a year in Canada, staying with a family and going to school, but she gained 85 points on the TOEIC (810 to 895) in one semester from hearing 30 stories in class and reading 1,700 pages of graded readers at home (Mason & Krashen, 2019).

Mr. Tanaka is not discouraged

This is what he said in the last part of his reflections:

“Although the test score was not good, I know that I have been getting better. I began to understand TV programs in English, such as documentary films where the narration is slower, and English Language became fun for me. I realize that I did not read a lot of easy books last year, so I will start again from what I did at the beginning – read a lot of books that I enjoy and understand. I began to read the Perfection Learning books that you loaned me right away when I came home today. I read half of one book at one sitting. There were some words that I felt were difficult, as they were before, but because I had read the *Twilight* series, I must have learned more words, and had no problem— the dictionary is not necessary at all. I might start reading books by Sydney Sheldon, which you said might be more suitable for me than *Twilight*. I would like to re-read the books that I read before. I would like to see whether I understand them better now than the first time I read them. I wish I had access to more books!”

When he received a disappointing result, he began to wonder whether he should study for tests, memorize words, and learn test-taking strategies, and I also wondered if SL/GSSR alone might be sufficient. I did not have the experience at that time (ten years ago) to disagree with him when he wanted to go back to the skill-based approach.

However, at the end of his reflection, he concluded that reading was the cause of his large gains on the TOEIC test. His progress will continue, I predict, when he has more access to interesting books and refocuses his attention on what really counts in language acquisition and literacy development: Optimal input in the form of reading for pleasure.

What I learned from this experience is that a teaching method that does not fit any of the characteristics of optimal input (Krashen, 1982, pages 62-77; Krashen & Mason, 2020) could result in zero acquisition or very little acquisition (Krashen 1982, page 62).

Note:

(1) Passage Novels: By Anne Schraff | Reading 3-6 | Lexile Level 440-780 | Interest Level 6-12.

<https://www.perfectionlearning.com/secondary-language-arts/striving-readers/passages-novels.html>

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