

The Naruto Breakthrough: The Home Run Book Experience and English Language Development

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The concept of the home run book was introduced by Trelease (2001), who hypothesized that one positive experience can be enough to create a permanent interest in reading. Many children have testified that the home run experience is real, that one book started them on the path to becoming dedicated readers (Kim and Krashen, 2000; Von Sprecken, Kim and Krashen, 2000; Ujiie and Krashen, 2002).

The importance of the home run book phenomenon is that a reading habit will result in improvement in all aspects of literacy (Krashen, 2004) and greater school success (see cases such as of Elizabeth Murray and Geoffrey Canada, described in Krashen, 2004).

Ramon

We present here a report on a teenage acquirer of English as a second language living in Arizona, Ramon, whose interest in the Naruto manga series appeared to be the cause of a dramatic improvement in his school performance and English language development.

Ramon is now finishing grade 10 in the US. He started school in the US in grade 9, soon after arriving, and knowing very little English, with only a sixth grade education in Mexico. At that time, his score on the reading section of the AZELLA test, given to ELLs in Arizona, placed him in the lowest of three categories of English proficiency ("basic"). (See table 1, appendix; his other scores on this test were not available to us).

In grade 9, Ramon was in a four-hour direct instruction English program; he changed schools during the fall semester of that year, and in the new school was in a two-hour direct instruction program that included guided reading, word study, and sustained silent reading (SSR) time. Ramon reported that during SSR he read only the simplest kindergarten level books. Because there were few relatively few ESL students in the high school, no sheltered classes were offered, and Ramon attended regular subject matter classes that included accommodations for second language acquirers.

Near the end of the fall semester, Ramon took the Renaissance Learning Star Test of reading comprehension, scoring at the 1.7 grade level (table 2, appendix).

The Naruto Breakthrough

Ramon found his Home Run Book during the winter break of his first year in high school: He discovered a Japanese manga series about a teenage Ninja named Naruto, based on a TV series he had watched in Spanish while living in Mexico. After returning

to school after break, Ramon started requesting library passes in order to take out books in the Naruto series. After exhausting the school library's supply, he went to the public library to get more Naruto books.

The change in his school performance was dramatic. Soon after he started reading Naruto books, he became the star of his guided reading group, and enjoyed reading passages aloud. He asked clarifying questions, made inferences, and participated with vigor.

Table 1 (appendix) presents Ramon's AZELLA reading score in the fall of his first year in high school (discussed earlier) and again in the spring.

The AZELLA test categorizes scores into three categories: basic, intermediate and proficient. In reading, Ramon progressed from the "basic" category to "intermediate," scoring just below the "proficient" level after only one academic year, the level required to be reclassified as a fluent English speaker. He also scored at the intermediate level in comprehension, but did not do as well on other parts of the Spring (March) 2014 AZELLA, scoring in the high basic range in writing, listening and speaking (table 2).

On the Renaissance Learning Star Test of reading, Ramon did not improve on the first post-winter break administration in January of 2014, and had improved only slightly at the end of the academic year (table 2).

But most remarkable for a student with very low English proficiency at the start of the year, Ramon passed all of his mainstream classes in grade 9, including English, Intensive Writing, and Algebra Foundations.

Grade 10

Ramon continued to improve in grade 10, earning all A's and B's in his classes. As indicated in table 1, at the end of grade 10 his AZELLA scores, with the exception of reading, were greatly improved. Only his modest decline on the reading test prevented him from being reclassified as a proficient English speaker. (Note that reclassification after even three years is quite unusual; Crawford and Krashen, 2015). His STAR test scores were less impressive, but still showed improvement (1/5/15 and 3/5/15; table 2). His accomplishments were even more impressive when we consider the fact that his subject matter classes, as noted earlier, were not "sheltered" but were mainstream classes with some accommodation for second language acquirers.

Ramon also joined the soccer team in grade 10. He reported that he joined due to his increased level of understanding of English and a desire to belong to a peer group at his current high school.

At the time of this writing (June, 2015), Ramon is still reading Naruto, which he has found online in both English and Spanish. If Ramon's interest in reading was limited to Naruto manga, his hopes for future literacy development and performance in school

improvement would be extremely limited. This is clearly not the case. He is now completing reading the first book of the Percy Jackson and the Olympian series (The Lightning Thief, by Rick Riordan) in English, having read the entire series in graphic novel format. He is also reading The Red Pyramid (also by Rick Riordan) in graphic novel format. He is thus a "narrow reader," reading series and books by the same author, a reading strategy typical of good readers (Krashen, 2004).

His continuing interest in reading predicts that his progress in English, especially "academic English," will continue. His goal is to obtain all A's in his mainstream courses in 11th grade. Thanks to his home run book, Naruto, Ramon has a good chance of achieving his goal.

Post-script: Ramon and Spelling

Table 3 (appendix) presents Ramon's scores on a standardized spelling test (Words Their Way), a test linked to a structured word study program designed for elementary school students up to grade 6. Ramon initially scored at the "Early Within Word" stage (grades 1 to mid-4), then improved to the "Late Syllables and Affixes" stage (grade 5) just after the Naruto Breakthrough (1/18/14), but made no additional progress over the next year. His immediate and dramatic gain just after winter break was unexpected; he had only just begun his reading journey. Also, his lack of improvement over the next year was unexpected.

Because of the demonstrated relationship between spelling and reading (Krashen, 2004), we predict that Ramon's spelling will improve as he reads more. In light of his obvious academic progress and gains in AZELLA test scores, what we can conclude is that it is unwise to come to conclusions on the basis of spelling tests alone.

Appendix: Tables

Table 1: AZELLA test results

	Fall 2013	Spring 2014	Spring 2015
Reading	164 (B)	246 (I)	233 (I)
Writing		187 (B)	252 (P)
Listening		229 (B)	274 (P)
Speaking		196 (B)	281 (P)
Language		208 (B)	243 (I)
Oral		209 (B)	276 (P)
Comprehension		240 (I)	246 (I)

B = basic (less than 230)

I = intermediate (230 to 249)

P = proficient (250 or greater).

Table 2: STAR Test results: grade level equivalents

11/6/13	1.7
1/13/14	1.7
3/31/14	1.6
5/12/14	2.2
8/7/14	2.8
1/5/15	4.5
3/5/15	3.3

Table 3: Spelling: WORDS THEIR WAY

11/6/13	32
1/18/14	54
3/31/14	57
5/13/14	53
8/5/14	50
10/7/14	48
1/6/15	51

Perfect score = 66

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