

Is there a “fast track” to second language acquisition? Do some people have special talents for language acquisition? Stephen Krashen.

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“The duration and intensity of activity in a language is what is crucial, not a mystic gift for languages” (Lomb Kato, polyglot, Lomb, 2016, p. 77).

Many seem to accept the hypothesis that some people are gifted for language acquisition, and acquire second languages more easily and rapidly than the rest of us. We often hear statements like “I’m no good at languages” among friends, and the idea of a special language talent is common even among professionals in language education.

I discovered this when I was in Hungary in 1996, teaching a short course at the university in Pecs. Thanks to one of my students, I met Dr. Lomb Kato, a famous polyglot who did not grow up bilingual, but eventually spoke 17 languages, acquired them all as an adult, and rarely traveled to countries where the languages were spoken. I visited her several times.

Eager to show off, I casually mentioned to my colleagues, professors at various Hungarian universities, that I had been hanging out with Lomb Kato, expecting them to be impressed. Not so. The universal reaction was dismissal. “Oh, she's just different, her brain is different ... there are people like that.”

To my knowledge none of them had met her or had read her book (Lomb, 2016) in which she describes the amazing amount of effort and time she put into language acquisition. And none of my colleagues provided any kind of description or explanation of super language acquirers. They were uninterested in even speculating as to what about their brains was different.

My goal in this paper is to begin discussion on how we can deal with this question of whether there is a difference in rate of attainment in second languages among people, whether some people have a “fast track” to language acquisition. A reasonable way of approaching this is to ask whether there is a difference if optimal conditions for language acquisition are present. Only then can we see our real potential for second language acquisition.

Optimal conditions

I assume here that optimal conditions for second language acquisition include the presence of a great deal of highly comprehensible, compelling (extremely interesting) and rich input (Krashen, Lee and Lao, 2017; Mason, 2018; Mason and Krashen, 2019).

One form of optimal input is self-selected reading. When reading is self-selected it has, of course, a very good chance of being comprehensible and interesting, and often contains a great deal of language. In voluntary, self-selected reading (Krashen, 2011), there is no obligation to finish the book or story, and there are no comprehension questions or book reports. The reader reads the text because the reader actually wants to.

An opportunity to study individual variation

In Mason and Krashen (2017) acquirers of English as a foreign language in Japan completed basic English classes with Dr. Beniko Mason. The classes consisted of Story Listening (Mason, 2019) and reading graded readers. At the end of the term, several of the students requested Dr. Mason’s assistance in helping them continue to improve in English and she agreed to help them find reading material. In return they agreed to take alternate forms of the TOEIC test (a standardized test of English reading and writing) and record what and how much they read. No book reports of any kind were requested. The eight readers ranged in age from 21 to 78 and their logs described their reading over time periods from 22 to 162 weeks.

On the basis of an analysis of the student logs and TOEIC scores, Mason and Krashen found that those who reported doing more self-selected reading made more progress on the TOEIC examination ($r = .94$ between gains and hours reported spent reading), consistent with the hypothesis that comprehensible input is the cause of language acquisition and literacy development. The average subject gained .6 points on the TOEIC examination for every hour of reading done (standard deviation = .20). This predicts that reading one hour a day for one year would result in a gain of over 200 points on the TOEIC.

The correlation between hours of reading and gains remained very high when pretest scores were controlled ($r = .92$). Some subjects engaged in other activities in addition to reading: test preparation, vocabulary study and listening to the radio. None of these activities had any significant impact on TOEIC gains (Krashen and Mason, 2015). Also of interest is that age was not a predictor of efficiency; the correlation between age and gains per hour of reading was not significant and close to zero ($r = .037$). This agrees with the results of multivariate studies; when comprehensible input in the form of pleasure reading is included as a predictor of second language proficiency, other predictors typically have no effect (Stokes, Krashen and Kartchner, 1998, Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Lee, 2005).

Of interest to us is that subjects did not read exactly the same books, as described in table one. There was some overlap, however, and all read primarily fiction.

Table One: What They Read

Reader	Reading Materials
Shinjiro	Graded readers and books for young adults
Okada	Books for young adults (e.g. books by Judy Blume) and easy best sellers
Kenta	Graded readers and other books (e.g. The Giver, Harry Potter series, books by Judy Blume)
Kashihara	Graded readers and other books for young adults (e.g. Harry Potter), and bestsellers
Tanaka	Graded readers and books for young adults(e.g. the Marvin Redpost series, books by Judy Blume and Louis Sachar)and young adult bestsellers(e.g. Twilight)
Adachi	Graded readers
Fujita	Graded readers. Books for young adults (e.g. The Book Thief, Twilight, Smart Women, You Belong to Me)
Nakano	Graded readers and books for young adults (e.g. Anne of Green Gables, Super Fudge and other Judy Blume novels, The Giver, Every Living Thing by James Herriot)

From: Mason and Krashen (2017).

How much individual variation?

To study the degree of individual variation in the group, a 95% confidence interval of .46 to .74 was calculated. In other words, it was projected that 95% of readers similar to those Mason studied would gain between .46 and .74 points on the TOEIC for every hour of self-selected pleasure read.

Over the short run (e.g. a month) even acquirers at the two extremes of the confidence interval may not show much of a difference. We would expect, however, “talented” acquirers on a fast track to have a very large lead over the long term, e.g. three years.

One hour a day of reading, over three years (about 1050 hours of reading) for a reader with a starting English level of TOEIC 250 (Basic Proficiency, “able to satisfy immediate survival needs) and the lowest rate of progress on the confidence interval, .46 pages per hour of reading, would result in a TOEIC score of 733, the Limited Working Proficiency level (“Able to satisfy most social demands and limited work requirements.”). [1050 hours * .46 points gain per hour = 483 points. 250 + 483 = 733]. (See Appendix for details on the TOEIC levels.)

At the top rate, .74 points per hour, three years of reading would result in a TOEIC score of 1027 [777+ 250], a score that goes over the top of their scale, beyond “International Professional Proficiency” (“Able to communicate effectively in any situation”).

Is the difference between the slowest and fastest acquirers’ evidence that some people are “gifted” for second language acquisition?

The gap between the average acquirer and the most rapid acquirer is not that large, and certainly not insurmountable. A reader making average improvement per hour on the TOEIC would gain 630 points in three years and reach 880 (“Working Proficiency Plus”), about 150 points less than the most rapid. One year of reading at one hour per day, a pleasant activity, would close the gap; two years of pleasure reading would close the gap between the slowest and fastest acquirers.

What is clear that the both the slowest and fastest gainers are predicted to make very good progress in second language acquisition after three years of pleasure reading.

Summary

These results are consistent with the hypothesis that we are all similarly gifted for second language acquisition:

Hours spent on self-selected reading correlated very highly with gains on the TOEIC. Other factors, including age of the reader, did not. This confirms the validity of the comprehension hypothesis and the impact of pleasure reading.

For each hour read, the average subject gained a little more than ½ point on the TOEIC. Variation among subjects was not extraordinary.

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Of course, the small sample size (n = 8) prevents confident generalizations. Much larger studies are needed to see the extent of agreement and variation among readers with different backgrounds; ours was a homogenous group of second language acquirers with similar backgrounds and all were interested in improving their competence in a second language. But the data presented here provides a reasonable methodology that can be used to test the “fast track” hypothesis.

Research in other areas, such as music, chess, skating, and wrestling, has shown that time spent in dedicated practice is strongly related to achievement (e.g. Ericsson, 1996). But “practice” in these areas is typically hard work requiring a great deal of discipline. This is not the case for language and literacy development. Engagement with compelling reading material, which is what we do in self-selected reading, has even been described as a positive addiction (Nell, 1988). As parents and teachers know, hearing stories is also very pleasant (Lee, 2018).

A counter claim

It has been claimed that some people are better at acquiring word meanings from context in reading. McQuillan (in press) notes, however, that studies claiming to show this do not control for the relative difficulty of texts and the reading ability of the readers. In these studies, all subjects are asked to read the same texts and derive meanings of the same unknown words, regardless of their previous reading experience. Self-selected reading controls for the difficulty of texts to a large extent: Recreational readers do not choose texts that are hard for them to understand. Studies of deriving words from texts do not use self-selected texts, and the sample texts are typically very short.

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Appendix: TOEIC Scores and Real-World Competence.

905-990	International Professional Proficiency (Able to communicate effectively in any situation.)
785-900	Working Proficiency Plus (Able to satisfy most work requirements with language that is often, but not always, acceptable and effective.)
605-780	Limited Working Proficiency (Able to satisfy most social demands and limited work requirements.)
405-600	Elementary Proficiency Plus (Can initiate and maintain predictable face-to-face conversations and satisfy social demands.)
255-400	Elementary Proficiency (Speaker has functional, but limited proficiency. Able to maintain very simple face-to-face conversations on familiar topics.)
10-250	Basic Proficiency (Able to satisfy immediate survival needs.)

From: The Waikato Institute of Education; <http://wie.ac.nz/toEICconversion.htm>, in Mason and Krashen (2017)