

## A Test of the Effect of Interesting and Relevant Subject Matter on Second Language Acquisition

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### **Introduction**

A number of studies have demonstrated the superiority of comprehension-based approaches over traditional approaches (Krashen 2003), but a confound exists in nearly all of them: In comprehension-based methods, the topics discussed in class are nearly always more interesting than in traditional classes. In fact, in older methods, such as grammar-translation, there may be no topic at all. In this study, an attempt was made to control for everything except subject matter.

The study was a comparison between classes following similar approaches, both based on communicative activities combined with grammar instruction. The only difference was that in one case, all activities were based on subject matter related to tourism and the students were training to work in the tourist industry. The comparison class did communicative activities unrelated to any one theme. The study was thus a test of the effect of interesting and relevant subject matter.

### **Subjects**

Subjects were all native speakers of Turkish, were high school graduates and had studied English for six years: 83% of the subjects in the experimental group and 80% of the subjects in the comparison group mentioned that their instruction used standard English Language teaching materials, namely An English Course for Turks. Only 10% of the subjects from both groups indicated that they had had contact with native speakers of English for one year or more. There were 50 students in each group, chosen from a larger group of 154 students based on their scores on the pretest, described below.

### **Method**

Experimental students were all interested in being employed in the tourism industry, as tour operators, assistant travel agents or as flight

attendants. Comparison students did not have this special motivation but were enrolled in general EFL classes in order to have better job opportunities.

Classes for both experimental and comparison groups were taught using a "communicative" approach. The communicative approach, as described in Krashen (1994), is based primarily on two hypotheses: (1) the "skill-building" hypothesis, the hypothesis that we acquire grammatical competence by first understanding rules and practicing them in output activities, which provides learners with a chance to make the rules "automatic" and an opportunity to get errors corrected; (2) the comprehensible output hypothesis, the view that we acquire language when we attempt to communicate and have to reformulate what we said in order to help our listener understand. Thus, in communicative classes, tasks involve both communication and also attempt to provide practice for "consolidation" of target grammar and vocabulary.

When activities are interesting, however, language acquisition can take place via comprehensible input, in agreement with the comprehension hypothesis.

Students in both groups experienced activities involving the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and both classes included formal grammar instruction. The difference between the groups was that for experimental students, all the activities related to the tourism industry: they were tasks that tourism employees would have to carry out in the workplace, such as making flight reservations and providing information about railroad schedules. The aspects of grammar or functions to be studied were those relevant to the topic, that made the unit more comprehensible and that helped students carry out the activities. In addition, professionals from the tourism sector with very good command of English were assigned as teachers together with English teachers.

The students in the comparison group received general EFL instruction by participating in communicative classroom activities using the course-book, *Headway Elementary*, and other communicative materials and tasks prepared by the teacher.

The participants in both groups received more than 90 hours of language instruction, which took about two months for the experimental group and three months for the comparisons. The experimental group met on weekends, for six hours on each weekend

day, a total of 96 hours. Comparisons had 128 hours of instruction, with classes meeting two days a week for three hours at a time.

### Measures and Results

Both groups were given an adapted version of the grammar part of the Oxford Placement Test before the instruction as a pre-test. Scores were nearly identical (experimental mean = 29,62, sd = 6; comparison mean = 29,48, sd = 5.9) and were, as expected, not significantly different.

The Key English Test (KET) was used as a post-test. The KET consists of reading, writing, listening, and speaking components. Two scorers evaluated the writing and the speaking tests. The interrater reliability for the two raters was .89 for the writing test and .87 for the speaking test at the significance level of .001.

	Exp	Comp	ES	p
Listening	18.9 (4.9)	15.4 (3.9)	1.02	0
Speaking	9.6 (2.5)	7.5 (2.5)	0.84	0
Reading	29.9 (5)	30.4 (5)	-0.1	0.61
Writing	14.3 (3.5)	13.3 (3.5)	0.29	0.21

ES: effect size

Standard deviations in parentheses

*Table 1. Results of post-test*

As presented in table 1, experimental group students outperformed comparisons on listening, speaking and writing, and differences for listening and speaking were statistically significant and, for listening and speaking, substantial, as revealed by the effect sizes. The reading scores were nearly the same and not significantly different.

### Discussion

Because the courses differed only in the subject matter and not in the method, the results are consistent with the hypothesis that greater

interest results in more language acquisition. Greater interest in the subject matter could have resulted in students' paying more attention to the input, with less attention being paid to form, leading to more comprehensible input and thus greater language acquisition, as contrasted with conscious learning.

The results, however, are best considered to be suggestive. While the comparisons had exposure to more class hours, their classes were of shorter duration, and occurred more frequently, which may have been less favorable. In addition, while the intention was to make methodology similar, and it appeared to be the case that the classes were in fact similar, no fidelity check was done to determine the amount of explicit language practice each group was exposed to.

It needs to be pointed out that this study was carried out as part of a dissertation in 1990, a time when the advantages of comprehension-based instruction were not as clear as they are today. The results do not imply that the communicative approach is the most effective way to teach second languages. The value of the study is that it provides evidence of the strong effect of interest.

#### REFERENCES

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