



## **Form-focused instruction and the learning experience of adult ESL students**

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### Abstract

The paper examines the learning experience of adult ESL students who depend on consciously learned knowledge for developing second language linguistic competence. The results of the study confirm that consciously learned language competence has not helped them acquire language. As the students believed that skill-building as the only path to second language competence, they did not show interest in getting exposure to input.

**Keywords:** Form-based classes, consciously learned knowledge, Communicative environment.

### 1. Introduction

*Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill.*

*Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language – natural communication – in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding.*

Stephen Krashen

The idea runs counter to the traditional view that consciously learned grammatical knowledge is necessary for developing second language linguistic competence. If language is acquired easily by experiencing input then why we need to take laborious drills (learning and practicing grammar) for acquiring language.

The skill-building hypothesis claims that learners acquire language first by learning conscious rules of grammar and later by fine tuning the language through error correction using grammar rules. In fact, studies (Truscott 1996; 2005) show that correcting errors using consciously learned language competence is clearly ineffective and harmful. This is because there are several limits in using consciously learned knowledge (e.g. Krashen 1982, 2003; Murphy & Hastings 2006; Ponniah 2007, 2009; Truscott 1998).

The motivation for this paper comes from my working experience as an ESL teacher in different Arts and Science Colleges and at Engineering Colleges. During my career, I observed that the



students, who depend on form, do not acquire language; most of them even do not know to construct sentences in English. In fact, the subjects who received comprehensible input in the form of free reading have reached higher levels of language competence (discussed in Ponniah, 2008).

The paper explores why ESL students in traditional form-based classes fail to acquire minimum level of language competence after learning the language over a decade. The problem may lie in the learning method and the type of instruction they received. Therefore, the learning experience of the students is discussed in this paper to know the factors that forbid them from acquiring the language.

## 2. Comprehensible Input

The Comprehension Hypothesis (Krashen 2002, 2003) states that we acquire language when we receive comprehensible input in the form of reading and listening. The input must be slightly ahead of the current level of understanding of the learners. If the current level of a learner is  $i$ , then he or she needs  $i+1$  input to foster acquisition. More precisely, the input must contain some aspects of language that the acquirer has not acquired but is developmentally ready to acquire. The hypothesis claims that grammatical competence and vocabulary knowledge are the result of listening and reading. The writing style and the spelling competence are the result of reading.

Mason and Krashen (1997) claim that the weak EFL students who did a semester of extensive reading in the place of traditional curriculum had greater gains in reading comprehension than the comparison subjects. Children participating in in-school reading programs easily outperformed the subjects who attended form-focused classes on tests of reading comprehension, writing and grammar (Elley 1998). Students who read for pleasure involuntarily acquire language skills (Krashen, 2004). Subjects devoted the time to in-class reading showed a clear and strong superiority over the comparison subjects in fluency, spelling, vocabulary, and content (Lee & Hsu, 2009).



### 3. The Study

#### 3.1. Participants

Subjects were 23 first year undergraduate students from a rural Arts and Science College affiliated with Madurai Kamaraj University, India. The subjects had studied in Tamil-language medium schools for twelve years (native language) and one year at the college, but had studied English as a second language for eleven years (from Std 3), and in these years they had repeatedly learnt

1. Grammar topics such as tenses, concord, active and passive voice, infinitives and gerunds, parts of speech, reported speech and degrees of comparison etc.
2. Words and phrases in isolation (e.g. synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, phrasal verbs and clichés).
3. Error correction exercises (identifying grammar, spelling and punctuation errors).
4. Some prose, poetry and drama, which the students said that they did not understand.

Discussions with the students indicated that all believed that learning grammar rules were the paths to second language competence. In fact, they are not interested in learning and practicing grammar. They are not aware of the fact that they can acquire language by reading and listening to the topics of interest.

#### 3.2. Procedure

A questionnaire was administered to the subjects to know about the kind of exposure they had in language classes. They were encouraged to consult with the teacher to clarify their doubts while filling out the questionnaire. They were also asked to take a reading/writing test that asks them to write a paragraph based on the information given in a table and were asked to develop the given hints into a story in order to assess their proficiency level. Data was also collected through discussions.



### 3.3. Results

The questionnaire is aimed to get information about the English learning history of the subjects and the test is conducted to adjudge their language proficiency. The tables 1 to 8 present the responses of the subjects to the eight research questions given in the questionnaire and the table 9 presents the results of the reading/writing test.

Table 1

1) What were your classes like?

Form-based classes that focus on learning and practicing grammar rules, list learning of vocabulary etc.; the teacher explanation of the rules and texts in the native (Tamil) language and rarely in English.	100% (23/23)
The class provides communicative and comprehensible input in the target language. The teacher explains in the target (English) language and sometimes in the native language	0% (0/23)
If you want to add more information, give it in detail. _____	Nil

Table 2

2) Do you enjoy learning grammar?

Yes	4.3% (1/23)
No	95.7% (22/23)

Table 3

3) Do you read the prescribed texts? ( Prose, poetry and drama)

All the texts/most of the texts	0% (0/23)
Some of the texts	26.1% (6/23)
Did not read	73.9 (17/23)



Table 4

4) If yes, why do you read the texts?

The table presents the responses of the six subjects who responded that they read some texts.

To learn the subject (English)	100% (6/6)
Read them for pleasure	0% (0/6)
If any other reasons, give details. _____	One among the six said he read when he was compelled

Discussions with the students revealed that they had read only a portion of a few texts on rare occasions and they could not continue to read because they did not understand the meaning of the texts.

Table 5

5) If no, what forbids you from reading the texts?

Responses of the subjects who did not read the prescribed texts.

Don't understand the meaning of the texts	70.6% (12/17)
Not interested in reading	29.4% (5/17)
If any other reasons, give details. _____	Nil

Twelve students said they did not understand the texts and the five said that they were not interested in reading the texts. When asked why they did not have interest in reading, they responded that they could not comprehend the meaning of the texts.

Table 6

6) How do you study for the exams?



Rote learning and Memorization (prepared essays given by the teachers)	100% (23/23)
By reading some books and articles	0% (0/23)
If you want to add more information, give it in detail. _____	Nil

Table 7

7) Do you have a habit of reading books in English?

Yes	4.4%(1/23)
No	95.6%(22/23)

Table 8: Presents the response of the student who said that she has a reading habit.

8) If yes, How often do you read?

Regularly	occasionally	Did not read
Nil	1	Nil

The test was administered to the subjects after they have answered the research questions. The maximum marks for the test was thirty.

Table 9: Presents the results of the Reading/writing test

	Judge 1	Judge 2	Judge 3
Mean	3.69 (12.32%)	3.56 (11.88%)	1.50 (5%)
SD	2.17	2.13	1.78

SD = Standard Deviation

### 3.4. Discussion

The responses of the subjects to the questionnaire support the claim that they receive form-focused instruction in ESL classes and the results of the reading/writing test confirm that this kind of instruction is ineffective.

The prescribed literary texts containing prose, poetry and drama were above the current level of understanding of the students and thus they did not provide comprehensible input. The subjects were not encouraged to read the texts and, moreover, they were not aware of the fact that they



can acquire language if they read the texts. They memorized the essays given by their teachers to get through the examinations.

Discussions with the students indicated that they believed that they have to first learn grammar and vocabulary and other skills consciously and later they need to use the consciously learned knowledge in actual performance. If this assumption is correct, they should have acquired high levels of language competence by now. Obviously, skill-building did not contribute to the development of language competence because it is a “folk theory of language development and it is reinforced by the fact that it is used in nearly all foreign and second language classes” (Krashen 2004). This indicates that we have committed errors in language education.

In fact, students need to acquire some amount of language by experiencing input to apply rules, and it is highly impossible to use rules in test like performance and real situations if they have not acquired the language.

If students continue to learn the language (English as a second language) in traditional form-focused classes, it is doubtful that they can acquire language, and it is doubtful that they will develop positive feelings for language. Therefore, traditional curriculum must be replaced by a syllabus that provides more comprehensible input. In order to create a communicative environment that contains more input, in-school reading programs can be integrated into ESL curriculum. This will motivate learners to get exposure to input and it will be a highly effective means to develop second language competence. Moreover, students can continue to develop language competence by experiencing input in the form of free reading even after the end of a program and thus they will become autonomous acquirers.

## **5. Conclusion**

In sum, form-focused classes with traditional curriculum cannot help students acquire language. Moreover, this will discourage them from learning a second language and, therefore, they should experience a rich diet of comprehensible input to acquire language.

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## Appendix

**Reading/writing Test**

1. Write a short paragraph comparing the properties of pig iron, steel and wrought iron

S.No.	Property	Pig iron	Steel	Wrought Iron
1	Melting point	1000°C	1300°C – 1400°C	1539°C
2.	Weldability	Cannot be welded	Can be welded	Can be welded
3.	Magnetization	Cannot be magnetized	Can be permanently magnetized	Can be temporarily magnetized
4.	Tempering	Can be tempered	Can be tempered	Cannot be tempered

2. Develop the given hints into a story

The philistine army-gather-war against Israel. Two armies-camped for battle-A philistine giant-wearing full armor-came, mock, challenge-Israelites to fight. His name-Goliath- The king, army – terrified of Goliath. David heard- Goliath shouting-daily defiance. David volunteered- fight Goliath- David carrying shepherd’s staff, slingshot- pouch of stones. David said- you come against me- sword and spear, javelin- but I – in the name of the Lord Almighty- David – took stone from bag- slung at Goliath’s head- the stone sank into-forehead-fell face down- David took- sword of Goliath- cut the head.