

# The Long-Term Effects of Comprehension-Based Instruction

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## ABSTRACT

*We examine the progress of Turkish students who completed an intensive instruction in English to prepare them for secondary school. In secondary school, those who were in a comprehension-based class outperformed those who took a traditional class and had a clearer understanding of how language is acquired. There is also evidence that those in the comprehension-based prep class continued to improve after completing secondary school.*

**Keywords:** Language acquisition; comprehension-based instruction.

## Introduction

Possibly the most important question in language education, but one that is rarely asked, is: Will students continue to improve after they finish language classes? Two sub-questions are contained in this question: Will former students have enough competence to understand at least some “authentic” input, and do they know what to do to improve?

In this study, we examine the progress of Turkish students who completed an intensive 36-week class designed to prepare students for secondary school English, as described in Isik (2000). All students had a very low level of English before taking the class.

## Results from Isik (2000): Comprehension-based versus traditional instruction

Isik (2000) compared the effects of two groups of students enrolled in the intensive class: one comprehension-based and the other traditional (form-focused) instruction. Each group included 20 students, receiving 29

hours of EFL instruction per week for 36 weeks.

To test the effects of these two different types of instruction on EFL learners’ reading, listening, writing skills, and grammar knowledge, both groups were given the Key English Test (KET) and the grammar component of the Oxford Placement Test at the end of the fourth month. At the end of the eighth month, the students were administered the Preliminary English Test (PET) and another version of the grammar component of the Oxford Placement Test. The results showed that comprehension-based EFL instruction was more effective than form-focused instruction in developing language skills as well as grammar knowledge.

## Secondary School Experiences and Beyond

After the intensive prep class, both groups had eight hours of English per week in secondary school for four years. The

instruction can be described as “contextualized form-focused,” that is, traditional instruction with some attempt at communication.

One of us (A. I.) had several discussions with the English teacher of the group that had experienced instruction based on the Comprehension Hypothesis before entering secondary school. Her observations confirmed that these students had a good understanding of the method they had experienced, and clearly saw the differences between this method and traditional methodology.

The teacher told A.I. that at first she had a difficult time with the experimental group, and that they made her feel incompetent and made her doubt her professional qualifications. They criticized her (traditional) way of teaching and repeatedly pointed out that English cannot be acquired by studying grammar. Also they asked for class activities which did not focus on form.

She noticed, however, that even though these students could not recite grammar rules as well as students in her other classes, they exhibited more grammatical accuracy in the classroom and on tests and their English sounded more natural and fluent.

She told A.I. that in response to the students’ requests she gradually included more activities that were truly communicative, although they were incompatible with her training and teaching experience. The class became more interesting and in fact became

her favorite class. Her students became the highest-ranking students in English in grades 9, 10, 11 and 12, actively participated in social and club activities in school and in fact showed more self-confidence than other students in general.

We have little information about what these students did at the tertiary level, only that both groups followed a mixture of form-focused and ESP instruction for four hours per week for four years. Subsequent to their formal education, they did not attend any private English schools, nor did they work in an English-medium context. We also have no information related to what the students in both groups did individually to improve their English. We do, however, have scores on tests taken after 2003, after they finished the tertiary level.

### **Test Results**

As a measure of students’ competence gained in the intensive class described in Isik (2000), we were able to obtain average scores on two measures, which were combined: KET = Key English Test, given halfway through the program, at the end of four months; PET = Preliminary English Test, given at the end of the program, after eight months. Both tests contain reading, writing, listening and speaking components.

As expected, scores for the comprehension-based group were significantly higher than scores of the traditionally taught group for the KET/PET combination, confirming the results reported in Isik (2000). **Table 1** provides means and standard deviations.

**Table 1. KET/PET score results**

	Traditional Instruction	Comprehension-based Instruction
N	7	14
mean (sd)	52.85 (12.24)	<b>72.79 (4.96)</b>

t= 5.37, p = .00015 (one-tail)

**YDS results**

The YDS (In Turkish, Yabancı Dil Seviye Belirleme Sınavı Foreign Language Proficiency Test) is a one hundred-item multiple choice exam. It tests grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, coherence, translation from Turkish to English and from English to Turkish, and sentence completion. The YDS is “taken by civil servants, academics and military personnel” in Turkey (“What is the YDS exam?” [www.dilkasabasi.com.tr/en/yds-course.php](http://www.dilkasabasi.com.tr/en/yds-course.php)).

It would be ideal to use alternative forms of the same test to measure growth over time, but such tests were not available. No data was available comparing the difficulty of the YDS and KET/PET tests, but the YDS is clearly more challenging than the KET/PET tests. Scores on the two tests were correlated, that is, those who did better on the ‘KET/PET also did better on the YDS. (For the traditionally taught students, n=7, r=.88; for

Comprehension-based students, r=.78, n=14.)<sup>1</sup>

Not all subjects took the YDS, and they took it at different times, ranging from 2005 to 2016. Considering all YDS scores, regardless of the year it was taken, the CI group significantly outperformed the traditional group (Table 2).

**Table 2. YDS scores**

	Traditional Instruction	Comprehension-based Instruction
N	7	14
mean (sd)	60.7 (12.57)	<b>84.7 (4.58)</b>

t= 6.47, p < .0001 df = 19

**Gains**

To compare the gains made by subjects over time, we analyzed the scores of the same subjects who took KET/PET test and also took the YDS years later, and compared the gains made by former traditional and former comprehension-based students. Because the same subjects took both tests, t-tests for correlated samples were used.

As Table 3 indicates, it appears that the comprehension-based group made better gains, but note that this is based on scores on two different tests and the sample size was small.

**Table 3. Estimates of gains**

	N	KET/PET	YDS	Gain	T	df	p	effect size
TRAD	7	52.8 (12.2)	60.7 (12.6)	7.9	3.44	6	0.0014	1.3
COMPR	14	72.8 (4.86)	84.7 (4.96)	11.9	6.61	26	0.0001	1.76

Effect size calculated using the formula  $d = t/\text{square root of } n$

**Controlling for time elapsed between tests**

To control for the amount of time elapsed and the year former students were tested on the YSD, we considered the scores of those in both groups who took the YSD in the same year. **Table 4** presents these YDS scores as well as gains since taking the

KET/PET (YDS score minus KET/PET score).

For each year considered, graduates of the comprehension-based class easily outscored the former traditional students, and in all cases except one (in 2006) made larger gains since taking the KET/PET.

**Table 4. YDS scores, controlling for the year YDS was taken**

Year	Traditional Instruction	Comprehension-based Instruction
2006	53 (6)	91 (9)
	51 (8)	80 (2)
		87 (13)
		83 (16)
		81 (14)
	52 (7)	84.4(10.2)
2008	79 (7)	88 (12)
		84 (11)
		91 (17)
		87.7(13.3)
2009	43 (6)	83 (12)
		88 (18)
		82 (13)
		84.3(14.3)
2010	61 (4)	83 (11)
2011	67 (3)	89 (11)

( ) = gains

**Continuing improvement**

To determine if comprehension-based students continued to improve in the years

after finishing their education, we examined the scores of those who took the SDY twice and in different years (**Table 5**).

**Table 5. Changes in YDS scores**

	1	2	Years	Gain	gains/yr
	2006: 91	2016: 95	10	4	2.5
	2006: 80	2011: 89	5	9	1.8
	2006: 87	2008: 91	2	4	2
	2009: 83	2014: 79	5	-4	-1.25
	2009: 83	2012: 90	3	7	2.3
	2007: 79	2009: 82	2	3	0.67
	2005: 80	2006: 83	1	3	3
	2005: 79	2010: 83	5	4	1.25
Means (SD)	82.75 (4.3)	86.5 (5.5)	3.75(3.8)	4.125(2.85)	1.53(1.34)

1 = first time taking YSD. 2 = second time taking YDS

All subjects who took the test twice improved between tests, except for one. The mean gain was about 1.5 points per year, a modest difference, but considerable over a longer time span, if maintained. Thus, these former comprehension-based students continued to improve, consistent with the idea that they knew how to do it. Unfortunately, we had no data of this kind on former traditional students.

### **Conclusions**

In addition to higher performance in the intensive language class, comprehension-based subjects appeared to have acquired more of the second language after completing the class.

These results confirm the hypothesis that those in comprehension-based classes will acquire more language than those in

traditional classes (Isik, 2000), making subsequent input more comprehensible.

The results of discussions with their teacher in secondary school suggest that those who did the comprehension-based intensive course had a clear understanding of how language is acquired, and that they enjoyed language acquisition via comprehensible input.

There are, however, obvious flaws in this study. As noted, the sample was small. Also, while we have a detailed description of the intensive English class the comprehension-based students took before entering secondary school, and some idea of their secondary school class, we know only that post-secondary English classes were form-based.

We also have no idea what took place

outside of language classes. We do not know if our subjects developed a reading habit, known to be a powerful means of language development (Krashen, 2004), whether they used English at work, which may or may not make a strong contribution to language acquisition (Krashen, 2018; Mason and Krashen, 2019), whether they had English-speaking friends, and whether they spent time in English-speaking countries.

Another flaw was the comparison of gain scores using different tests. Similar tests with a broad range of possible scores, such as the TOEIC, would provide far greater validity to the findings.

Our results are, therefore, only suggestive.

#### Notes

1. Some members of comprehension-based class took the YDS test twice, and one took it three times. For this analysis, we used the first score.

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#### Some useful web tools for speaking skills

##### Podcasting Tools

**Podomatic** (<http://www.podomatic.com>)

**Spreaker** (<http://www.spreaker.com>)

**Audioboom** (<https://audioboom.com>)

A podcast is an audio broadcast over the web. It is broken up into parts or episodes. Most podcasts are similar to news radio programs and deliver information on a regular basis, but they can also be comedy shows, special music broadcasts or talks. You as a teacher can set up a podcasting channel in Podomatic, Spreaker, or Audioboom.

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