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# The Starbucks® School of Language Acquisition: A Cheap, Caffeinated Plan to Prepare for Academic Study

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Many international students enroll in yearlong Intensive English Programs (IEP) in English-speaking countries in the hope of acquiring the language proficiency necessary for academic study. Nation (2006) estimated that these students need to know between 8,000 and 10,000 of the most commonly used word families in English to have good comprehension of adult-level texts.

There is considerable evidence, however, that reading for pleasure is at least as effective as formal study in boosting vocabulary knowledge (Krashen, 2004), including academic vocabulary (McQuillan, 2019).

Nation (2014) calculated that once you have command of the first 2,000 most frequently occurring words in English, you would need to read around 11,000,000 words to have a reasonable chance of acquiring up through the 9,000 words family level. If we assume (conservatively) that second-language readers read at a rate of 150 words per minute (wpm) (McQuillan & Krashen, 2008), then reading 11,000,000 words would take about 1,200 hours.

If you read three to four hours per day, you could reach the 1,200-hour goal in one year (((11,000,000 words/150 wpm)/60 minutes)/365 days = 3.35 hours per day). A more leisurely pace of an hour a day during high school or undergraduate study would take you to the required level within about three years.

The alternative to free reading, a study abroad program, is very expensive. The average cost (in 2018) at the University of California, Los Angeles's IEP is $22,000, not including nine months of room and board.

Free reading is much cheaper. If you have access to a public library with books in English, there is no cost for your books at all. Even if you have to purchase your books, the cost is not out of reach: 220 books with 50,000 words each at a price of $10 per book would cost you $2,200.

If we assume that both free reading and study abroad can bring you up through the 9,000 word family level, and that you have to purchase books to read, IEP study is still at least *ten times* more expensive per word acquired compared to free reading ($2.75/word versus $0.28/word).



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Instead of enrolling in an IEP, students should instead consider a trip to their local café for a nice, long, pleasurable afternoon of reading. Call it the Starbucks® School of Language Acquisition.

There are just a few guidelines to follow at the Starbucks® School. Find books that are both compelling and comprehensible to you (Krashen, Lee, & Lao, 2017). If you don't like a book or it's too hard, abandon it and move on to another. And don't worry about understanding every word or stopping to look up its definition. Focus instead on getting "lost in a book."

Note: It is true that Starbucks® coffee is more expensive than the kind IEP students might get from a school vending machine. But as Krashen (personal communication, February 4, 2019) points out, the total coffee cost is probably the same: IEP students will need to drink a lot more coffee in order to stay awake enough to complete their homework exercises.

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