

## Comprehensible Input as Sociocognitive Alignment: A Response to Cho and Krashen (2016)

Setiono Sugiharto

Catholic University, Jakarta, Indonesia

Faculty of Education and Language, Atma Jaya

[setiono.sugiharto@gmail.com](mailto:setiono.sugiharto@gmail.com)

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Corresponding author:

[setiono.sugiharto@gmail.com](mailto:setiono.sugiharto@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** A plethora of studies on how language is acquired through comprehensible inputs has generated valuable insights into language acquisition theory. Many of these studies have confirmed that humans acquire language in one way – through reading and listening. In particular, a recent study by Cho and Krashen (2016) published in this journal further confirms that the exposure to input (i.e. in the form of pleasure reading) is beneficial for attaining advanced level of language development both in a foreign and second language. While insightful, this study is highly descriptive and lacks explanatory power. In addition, it treats successful acquisition as a result of the sole contribution of mind; that is, acquisition is seen as internally driven and resides in intellect. Thus, we need to go beyond this description. In this article, I will provide more explanation to their descriptive exposition by showing that the acquisition of both first and second language is a gradual result of “sociocognitive alignment” (Atkinson, 2010). This is to say that multifaceted sociomaterial aspects, other than cognition, play a key role and immensely contributes to successful acquisition of language.

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### 1. Introduction

In second language acquisition scholarship, Krashen’s Inputs Hypothesis or the the Comprehension Hypothesis (henceforth CH), as he now prefers to call it (Krashen, 2004) is ineluctably a hypothesis that has withstood the test of time, despite harsh criticisms leveled against it. It is no exaggeration to say that current literature in second language has borrowed insights generated from Krashen’s erudite works. CH, as Krashen (2004) argues, constitutes “the core of current language acquisition theory” (p. 21).

A recent study by Cho and Krashen (2016) published in this journal is clearly an expansion of empirical supports for this hypothesis. Presenting six case histories of second language acquirers hailing from different linguistic and culutral backgorunds, they concluded that long term pleasure reading and self-selected voluntary reading is the strongest predictor of success for achieving advanced level in a second and foreign language, thus buttressing Krashen’s (2004) core hypothesis, the Comprehension Hypothesis.

In this article, I will argue that Cho and Krashen's (2016) study, while revealing, is too descriptive and lacks explanatory power in accounting for the success of language acquirers' efforts to advance their language ability. More centrally, their approach to describing the case histories of the six language acquirers in their study is implicitly cognitivist in nature, seemingly disregarding the role of sociomaterial aspects that also contributes to language acquisition. Ironically, while Cho and Krashen credits self-selected books and library as central to ensuring acquisition to take place, their description stops short in further exploring the relationship between these sociomaterial components and language development.

## **2. Comprehensible Inputs as Sociocognitive Alignment**

Cho and Krashen's (2016) recent study has helped throw light into what we need to do to accelerate language acquirers' efforts to boost their language development in both their second and foreign language. Based on the six case histories they reported, they argue that long-term pleasure reading is vital for language improvement if the following conditions are to be met: (1) reading experiences in the form of sustained silent reading class, reading a book in English, learning about the power of reading in an academic class, (2) plenty of access to books, (3) time and place to read regularly, (4) self-selected and narrow reading, and (5) no tests exercises, and no rewards for reading.

Cho and Krashen did mention the role of sociomaterial aspects such as prior reading experiences, books and library as central to the advancement of language development. It is these aspects that, they claim, can establish "a long term reading habit" (p. 7), a claim consistent with the CH. Nevertheless, the fact that these sociomaterial environments contribute to language development (i.e. in developing a long-term pleasure reading habit) remains underexplored in their article.

Using Atkinson's (2010) basic principles of sociocognition especially those of adaptivity and alignment, I shall provide accounts as to why the language acquires reported in Cho and Krashen's study succeeded in maintaining their pleasure reading habit, and hence improving their language development.

First, the six language acquirers in Cho and Krashen's study have an adept skill in coordinating and integrating sociomaterials in their surroundings. They can adaptively vary their prior reading experiences, reading habits, efforts to get easy access to books and library, and their understanding about the power of reading in accordance to their own expectations of success in acquiring their second language. This suggests that they have developed the "adaptive functionality" (Atkinson, 2010). They are able to relate, integrate, articulate, and contextualize their surrounding vicinity (e.g. by self-selecting books that fit their interest), and internalize them to accomplish their goal –to be an autonomous language acquirers – the eventual goal of language acquisition (Krashen, 2004). Yet as Cho and Krashen are fully engrossed in *acquisition* (It is well-established in the SLA literature that Krashen consistently distinguishes acquisition from learning) at the expense of *learning*, they greatly miss the contributions of the latter to language acquisition processes.

However, if we shift our perspectives from the notion of learning as merely a cognitive activity taking place in individual student (i.e. how learning a certain grammatical element can

help students acquire it?), to the notion of learning as relational, experiential, participatory and as always embedded in a social action (Atkinson, 2010), then we begin to realize the merits of *learning* in foreign and second language acquisition processes.

Secondly, these language acquirers did not feel complacent with their current literacy ability, but endeavored to continuously align and coordinate their competence to ecosocial elements they encounter in their daily life. Under this alignment principle, it is plausible that the rapid development of the people reported in Cho and Krashen's case histories is due to their coordinated interaction to other semiotic resources (e.g. pictures, symbols, and imagery) other than linguistic codes. Alignment here is defined by Atkinson, Churchill, Nishino, and Okada (2007) as "the complex means by which human beings effect coordinated interaction, and maintain that interaction in dynamically adaptive ways" (p. 169). This principle also implies that learning is an activity where a learner engages in a complex and multimodal environments. Linguistic element is just one of this modality; others being sounds, symbols, imagery, and pictures. While Cho and Krashen did highlight the centrality of non-human environments mainly books, libraries and time for reading, they did not disentangle the close alignment of these to the way their reported language acquirers attain advanced level of literacy competence.

From the merging of both social and cognitive perspective, it is clear then that the success of the people in reading in second language reported in Cho and Krashen is not only due to their gradually developing competence, but also due to their adeptness in adapting and aligning this competence to their sociomaterial environments. It is this sociocognitive aspect that their article misses.

### **3. Concluding Remarks: Being Trapped in the Cognitivist Paradigm**

Nishino and Atkinson (2015) assert, "Mainstream approaches to SLA are highly cognitivist..." (p. 38). Krashen's works in general and Cho and Krashen's study (2016) in particular reflect this assertion. It is evident that despite a frequent mention of sociomaterial components, mainly books and libraries, in Krashen previous works and in Cho and Krashen (2016) study, the roles of these sociomaterial environments are never explored. It seems that these sociomaterial aspects are in an alignment with cognition and serve only as an ancillary means to attain autonomous acquisition, rather than as the central factors by themselves.

Needless to say, Cho and Krashen's study (2016) and many more of Krashen's works in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) need to be lauded for valuable insights they have generated and have contributed to the field. Yet, most of their studies tend to be highly descriptive in nature and lack explanatory power. While most of their contemporary studies in SLA feverishly champion the benefits and power of books, these studies often fail to explore the connection between students' cognitive ability and the sociomaterial environments which ironically they acknowledge as playing a pivotal role in accelerating students' first and second language development. It seems that Krashen, and probably his zealous followers are being trapped in the Cognitivist Paradigm, which makes them indifferent to explore the role of social variables in their studies.

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**Bio:** Setiono Sugiharto is an associate professor of English at the Faculty of Education and Language, Atma Jaya Catholic University Jakarta, Indonesia. His writings have been published in *The Journal of ASIA TEFL*, *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, *The Routledge Handbook of Educational Linguistics*, and *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*.

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