

# **REMARKS ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LITERACY: LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND TEACHING, FREE READING, "TEST-PREP" AND ITS CONSEQUENCES, THE USE OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE, WRITING, AND THE GREAT NATIVE SPEAKER TEACHER DEBATE**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reviews the arguments for comprehensible input (the "comprehension hypothesis" and discusses some of its applications to beginning and intermediate language teaching, including free voluntary reading as a bridge from conversational to academic language. The comprehension hypothesis provides some guidance on the proper use of the first language in second language teaching and helps explain what writing can and cannot do. Finally, the comprehension hypothesis contributes to the Great Native Speaker Teacher debate: We want teachers (1) to understand language acquisition, (2) to understand language pedagogy, and (3) to speak the language well. My point is that number (3) alone is not enough, even if the teacher is a native speaker.

**Keywords:** comprehensible input, language acquisition, TPR, Natural Approach, TPRS, sheltered subject matter teaching, free voluntary reading, writing

## **INTRODUCTION: SOME FUNDAMENTALS**

I present first what I consider to be the fundamentals of both language acquisition and literacy development. (What follows in this section is presented in more detail in a number of publications, e.g. Krashen, 1982, 1985, 2003).

Language and literacy can be "acquired" or "learned." "Acquisition" occurs subconsciously: While it is happening, you are not aware it is happening, and after it has happened, the knowledge is represented subconsciously in your brain. In contrast, "learning" is conscious; it is "knowing about" the language. When we talk about "rules" and "grammar" we are usually talking about "Learning."

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Acquired competence plays a much larger role in language use than learned competence does. Acquired competence provides our fluency and nearly all of our accuracy when we speak or write in a second language. Consciously learned competence makes only a small contribution to our grammatical accuracy, and only when stringent conditions are met: We use consciously learned language to edit our output when we consciously know the rule, which is daunting considering the complexity of the grammar of any language, when we have time to apply the rule, which is not usually available in conversation, and when we are thinking about correctness, or focused on form.

This is not to say that grammar teaching is bad and must be forbidden: The point is that it is limited: Only a small part of the grammatical system of any language can be consciously learned, it takes time and effort to retrieve grammatical rules from our memory and apply them, and this can only happen when we are thinking about formal correctness. These severe conditions are met on grammar tests, and it is here where we see clear evidence of the use of consciously learned rules (Krashen, 1981). Consciously learned rules are also of some help in editing, the final stage of the composing process.

Acquisition of language and literacy takes place in only one way: When we understand what we hear and read, that is, when we understand the message. "Learning" takes place when we consciously study the rules of a language, or figure them out, and they become "automatic" when we use them repeatedly in speech or writing. Error correction, it is hypothesized, helps us arrive at the right version of our consciously learned rules. Error correction only shows an effect when the conditions for the use of conscious grammar are met, and the effect is typically weak, fragile, and often not even present at all (Truscott, 1996, 2005, 2007), confirming the limitations of grammar learning.

An important corollary of the Comprehension Hypothesis is that we do not acquire language when we produce it, only when we understand it. The ability to speak is the result of language acquisition, not the cause (see also remarks on writing, below). Another corollary is the claim that when acquirers obtain sufficient comprehensible input, all the grammatical structures they are ready to acquire are automatically present in the input (see especially Krashen, 2013a).

For acquisition to happen, we must pay attention to what we read or what is said to us. For this to happen, the input must be interesting to us. It may be the case that optimal input is "compelling," so interesting that we are not aware of what grammatical forms are being used in the input or

sometimes what language we are listening to or reading. This happens in enjoyable conversations and when we are "lost in a book" or movie. Language acquisition and literacy development is the unexpected and sometimes even unrecognized by-product of compelling comprehensible input (Krashen, 2011a).

## **APPLICATION**

A number of studies have shown that second and foreign language classes based on the Comprehension Hypothesis are more effective than those based on conscious learning (Krashen, 1982, 1991, 2003, 2014). These classes do not force students to speak before they feel ready to speak, and errors are not corrected.

An early comprehension-based method was Total Physical Response (TPR), developed by James Asher, which relied largely on teachers giving students commands and the students obeying the commands, which were made comprehensible by the teachers' movements (e.g. Asher, 1966, 1969). This was followed by the Natural Approach, developed by Tracy Terrell, which incorporated TPR as well as discussions, games, and tasks (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

A recently developed comprehension-based method is Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS), developed by Blane Ray. TPRS, as the name indicates, includes reading and the co-creation of stories/drama involving the teacher and the students.

Focal Skills, as the name implies, focuses on one component at a time (e.g. Listening and then Reading) with an emphasis on comprehensible input. Focal Skills was developed by Ashley Hastings.

As noted earlier, these methods have passed the empirical test: students in these classes outperform those in traditional classes on a variety of tests that involve communication, and do as well or better on traditional grammar tests. Most important, when language study is voluntary, students in comprehension-based classes are also more likely to continue with language classes the next term.

Comprehension-based language classes at the intermediate level are content-based, or "sheltered." In sheltered classes, second language acquirers study content. If there is a test or project required, it is based on the content of the class. When compared to intermediate foreign language classes, students in sheltered classes acquire as much or more language, and a great deal of subject matter. They also make progress acquiring "academic language" (Krashen, 1991, Dupuy, 2000). I need to point out that sheltered subject matter teaching is not the same thing as the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, or the SIOP model (Krashen, 2013b).

## Free Voluntary Reading

By far the most powerful tool we have in language and literacy development is free voluntary reading, reading because you want to. Study after study confirms that free voluntary reading is the source of our reading ability, writing style, vocabulary, spelling, and the ability to handle complex grammatical constructions (Krashen, 2004; 2011b). Free voluntary reading works because it is comprehensible input, and, very often, it is compelling.

Not only do readers develop more competence in literacy, they also know more: Those who read more know more about literature (Ravitch and Finn, 1987; West, Stanovich, and Mitchell, 1983), about science and social studies (Stanovich and Cunningham, 1993), and even have more “practical knowledge” (Stanovich and Cunningham, 1993). Much of this occurs when readers are reading what some consider to be “light” reading, largely fiction.

Research demonstrating the value of free voluntary reading includes studies of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), a program in which about ten to fifteen minutes each day is taken from the language class each day, and students simply read whatever they want to read. There is no accountability in the form of tests or book reports, readers do not have to finish every book they start, and do not have to even remember to bring their own book each time: SSR programs also include access to classroom and school libraries.

SSR studies using English have been done with first and second languages, with children, teenagers and older readers, with consistently positive results (Krashen, 2004, 2011; Pilgreen, 2000). For recent evidence showing that in-school self-selected reading works for Chinese as well, see Tse, Xiao, Ko, Lam, Hui, & Ng (in press). Krashen (2011c) discusses some current concerns about sustained silent reading, e.g. whether students are really reading during SSR or just doing sustained silent page-turning, as some have claimed.

Case histories confirm the value of free reading. This one shows the effect of compelling reading on first language literacy development:

Fink (1996) studied twelve people, English speakers in the US, who had been classified as dyslexic when they were young. Eleven learned to read between ages ten and twelve and one did not learn to read until grade 12. All learned to read quite well. In fact, nine published creative or scholarly works and one won a Nobel Prize.

Compelling comprehensible reading was the path for all of them: “As children, each had a passionate personal interest, a burning desire to

know more about a discipline that required reading. Spurred by this passionate interest, all read voraciously, seeking and reading everything they could get their hands on about a single intriguing topic" (pp. 274-275).

Their goal, I suggest, was not to "learn to read." Their goal was to find out more about something that was interesting to them.

### **The Book Whisperer**

A promising way of combining sheltered subject matter teaching and free reading is to offer sheltered literature classes. Donalyn Miller (2009) has developed an excellent method that she uses in classes for native speakers that can easily be applied to second and foreign language classes. Students are required to read works in a variety of genres, and there is class discussion of the structure of genre. But all reading is self-selected. If the assignment is to read two biographies, a student can select ANY two, even Lady Gaga and Tiger Woods. This insures reading that is compelling to each student, and insures that discussions will be lively and insightful. Miller reports that her middle school students are required to read about 40 books during the school year in this kind of program, and that those who read the 40 books always read more.

## **SOME ISSUES IN FREE VOLUNTARY READING**

### **Isn't Reading in Decline?**

We always hear that "nobody likes to read these days" and there are regular warnings from the media that reading is in a decline. A look at the evidence shows this is not true at all (Krashen, 2011d). If it is not true, why is this belief so common? Schatz, Panko, Pierce, and Krashen (2010) asked fourth and fifth graders in the US how much they liked to read (a lot, kind of, not very much) and asked them how much their friends and classmates liked to read. The students consistently reported that they liked to read more than both other groups. This, of course, cannot be true in the case of classmates because in the studies all members of the same class took the survey.

Our (Lee, Lao and Krashen, in press) study found identical results for seventh graders in Hefei, China. Our conclusion: We underestimate how much others like to read and how much they read because we don't see it happening. Reading is usually a private activity.

### **Will They Stick with Easy Reading?**

There is a fear that children, if allowed to select their own reading, will stick with easy books and they will never make progress in literacy

development. In fact, the US Common Core language arts standards require that children read at their reading level or above, never below (Krashen, 2013c). We (Krashen, Lee & Lao, forthcoming) obtained titles and samples of books that children took out of the library at an elementary school in Hefei, and asked both teachers and some students to rate the books in terms of difficulty of language and content. The judges agreed: There is of course variation, but children tend to choose harder and more complex books as they matured. They don't stick to easy reading.

### **The Bridge Hypothesis**

Self-selected free voluntary reading alone will generally not bring readers to the highest levels of literacy. It serves as a bridge, building the competence, both linguistic and cognitive, that will make very demanding reading more comprehensible. Simonton's findings confirm this: Simonton (1988) concluded that "omnivorous reading in childhood and adolescence correlates positively with ultimate adult success." (p. 11).

Michael Faraday (1791-1867) is a good example. Faraday came from a poor family, left school before he was 13, and worked for seven years as an apprentice bookbinder. This meant he had lots of access to books. His employer "was a sympathetic and helpful individual who did much to encourage his apprentices' interests" (Howe, 1999 p. 266). According to Howe, Faraday "read voraciously" and also attended lectures and classes on his own.

Faraday clearly never studied, never prepared for examinations. He did a great deal of wide reading when he was a teen-ager, including *The Arabian Nights* and novels. Howe speculates that Faraday's interest in science grew gradually, becoming firm when he was around 18 (p. 88). Working as an assistant to a famous chemist, Humphrey Davy, Faraday immediately took advantage of the facilities available to him and "plunged into research of his own" (Howe, p. 102) at age 21, and published his first paper at age 25, leading to his stunning career as one of the greatest scientists of all time.

Thus, compelling self-selected reading, in addition to providing us with literacy and knowledge, helps us discover our interests and our strengths.

### **Libraries**

For reading to happen, we must have access to books. Given access to interesting reading and time to read, nearly all young people will read

(Krashen, 2004), but without access, no reading will take place.

A major source of reading material is the library – and for those living in poverty, it is often the only source. There is an impressive body of research showing that access to a quality school library results in better literacy development (especially the work of Keith Curry Lance, available online at <http://www.lrs.org/impact.php>).

We (Krashen, Lee, and McQuillan, 2012) analyzed data from the PIRLS examination, a reading test given to 10 year-old children in over 40 countries in their own language. We found that the strongest predictor of reading achievement was SES, socio-economic class, defined here as a combination of education, life expectancy and wealth in each country. In agreement with many other studies, we found that lower SES meant lower performance.

Access to a school library with at least 500 books was the second strongest predictor of reading achievement. As was the case in another study (Achterman, 2008) the library predictor was nearly as strong a positive predictor as social class was a negative predictor, which suggests that access to books via a library can balance the negative effect of poverty.

The predictor "hours per week devoted to reading instruction" did not do well. In fact, according to our analysis, the effect of instruction was modest and negative, that is, more instruction tended to be related to lower performance on the reading test. It may be the case that a little reading instruction is beneficial, but after a point it is ineffective and counterproductive.

It makes sense to predict that libraries will have their strongest impact in less SES advanced countries, situations in which children have few or no other sources of books. Elley (1992) has reported just that (p. 67).

### **A Matter of Concern**

PIRLS also supplies data on what percentage of ten year-olds and their parents like to read. It can be argued that this kind of data is the most important: If young people like to read, and they have access to books and time to read, they will do well on any examination, and continue to read and grow in language and literacy for years after our programs end. Data from some high SES countries confirms this. Ten year olds in the countries listed in table 1 also have high PIRLS scores.

TABLE 1  
High SES, High PIRLS, and they like to read

n = 7	HDI	parent likes	child likes
New Zealand	0.91	51	32
Australia	0.93	48	30
Canada	0.90	41	35
Germany	0.91	37	34
Israel	0.89	41	32
Ireland	0.91	48	37
Austria	0.89	40	31
MEAN	.91 (.01)	43.7 (5.2)	33 (2.5)

Data from: Mullis, Martin, Foy, and Drucker, 2012.

We have noted, however, that in some places, SES and PIRLS scores are high, but neither children nor their parents say they like to read (Loh and Krashen, 2015). We call this group the "test-prep" group, for reasons that will become clear below.

TABLE 3  
The Test-Prep group

n = 4	HDI	parent likes	child likes
Hong Kong	0.90	14	21
Taiwan	0.88	17	23
Italy	0.87	24	23
Singapore	0.87	21	22
MEANS	.88 (.01)	19 (4.4)	22.3 (.96)

Data from: Mullis, Martin, Foy, and Drucker, 2012.

Table 3 compares the groups in tables 1 and 2 with overall results from 41 countries:

TABLE 3  
Comparisons

Group	N	HDI	parent likes	child likes	PIRLS
Baseline	7	.91 (.01)	43.7 (5.2)	33 (2.5)	538.4 (9.7)
Test Prep	4	.88 (.01)	19 (4.4)	22.3 (.96)	558 (13.7)
overall	41	.83 (.07)	31.2 (11.3)	28.1 (6.5)	509.7 (56)

Data from: Mullis, Martin, Foy, and Drucker, 2012.



For the countries in table 2, children are not enthusiastic about reading but score well on the PIRLS anyway. It seems that they have taken an alternate route to a high score on PIRLS, known as test-preparation, class time dedicated to making students familiar with the exam, as well as teaching test-taking strategies, techniques that will result in higher scores but not because of better reading ability, e.g. eliminating obvious distractors on multiple-choice tests, reading the question before reading the passage, etc.. Test-preparation alone, however, is probably not enough to achieve the high scores these students get. Most likely these students are also fed a heavy dose of assigned, difficult reading.

If this analysis is correct, children in the "test-prep" areas pay a heavy price for their high PIRLS scores. The lack of interest in reading of their parents suggests that test-prep plus uninteresting reading can result in a permanent lack of interest in reading, which has very negative consequences.

## **BILINGUAL EDUCATION: THE USE OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE**

Bilingual education is hotly debated all over the world. My interpretation is that it is a very good thing. Effective bilingual programs use the child's first language in ways that accelerate second language development. This can happen in two ways:

- A good education in the child's first language means more subject matter knowledge and more knowledge of the world, which means that what the child reads and hears is more comprehensible.
- Developing literacy in the child's first language is a short-cut to developing literacy in the second language: If we learn to read by understanding text, as proposed by Goodman (Flurkey & Xu, 2003) and Smith (2004), a concept related to the Comprehension Hypothesis, it is easier to learn to read in a language you already know: It is more comprehensible. The transfer of reading ability across languages occurs even when the writing systems are very different (Cummins, 1991; Krashen, 1996). Once you have learned to read in any language, you have learned to read. Correlations between reading scores in the first and second language are generally positive, given the chance to acquire the second language (e.g. Loh & Tse, 2009).

Good bilingual programs provide comprehensible subject matter instruction without translation in the first language, develop literacy in the first language, and provide second language classes based on the

comprehension approach. Scientific studies done in the US consistently show that language minority students in well-designed bilingual programs outperform similar students enrolled in English-only programs on tests of English reading (McField & McField, 2014; Crawford & Krashen, 2015), and similar results have been obtained from studies done in other countries with other languages (Krashen, 1999; Lao & Krashen, 1998).

## **CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE**

Early use of the first language in school will, as discussed just above, lead to better acquisition of the second language. There are good arguments for continuing first language development to high levels: Better communication with the older generation, which means access to wisdom not available elsewhere, practical, economic advantages, and greater cognitive development (Krashen, Tse, & McQuillan, 1998).

There is, in fact, recent research showing that regular use more than one language in daily life can slow the onset of dementia (Bialystok, Craik & Freedman, 2007). Bialystok, Craik, Klein, & Viswanathan (2004) explain why: they found that older bilinguals show less of a decline with age than monolinguals in tasks that require keeping information in mind and ignoring distractors. Apparently, the regular use of two languages helps maintain this ability.

## **WHAT ABOUT WRITING?**

Despite assertions that we that we "learn to write by writing," the research is consistent with the view that writing itself does not contribute directly to language acquisition (Mason, 2004; Sari, 2013). The competence required to write with an effective and acceptable writing style comes from reading, as does nearly all our mastery of the "conventions of writing" (Krashen, 2004, Lee 2005). But writing, in addition to communicating our ideas, makes profound contributions. Writing is a powerful means of helping us solve problems: Writing, in other words, makes us smarter.

The field of language arts has made great progress in the last few decades in revealing strategies good writers use to do this, i.e. the composing process (Krashen, 2014; Lee & Krashen, 2003). An example is revision: Good writers realize that as they go from draft to draft, they come up with better and clearer ideas. As Peter Elbow has noted, in writing, "Meaning is not what you start with, but what you end up with" (Elbow, 1973, p. 15).

Thus, acquisition of the special language of writing comes from reading, but our ability to use writing to solve problems comes from knowledge of the composing process.

## **A CONTROVERSY THAT IS EASILY SETTLED: NATIVE SPEAKER TEACHERS**

### **The Requirements**

I think it is obvious that a competent second language teacher should meet the following requirements:

1. a knowledge of how language is acquired.
2. a knowledge of pedagogy (e.g. if the Comprehension Hypothesis is correct, this means familiarity with TPRS, sheltered subject matter teaching, popular literature of interest to second language students)
3. a high level of competence in the second language.

The point of stating these three requirements is that number 3 alone is not enough. This runs counter to the practice in some institutions of hiring native speakers just because they are native speakers.

### **A Misunderstanding Over "Immersion"**

I tried to make the three points presented above in a letter published in the *South China Morning Post* (June 19, 2014), in which I stated: "Local teachers who can help students find comprehensible and interesting listening and reading material, and who can teach them about the process of second language acquisition are far preferable to native speakers whose only advantage is an accent."

In my view, my letter should have been greeted warmly by native speakers of English teaching in Hong Kong (the NET group). It highlighted the necessity of understanding language acquisition and pedagogy, of professionalism, not just being a native speaker.

Instead, the letter resulted in a storm of protest from native speaker English teachers in Hong Kong, accusing me of seeking to "end the NET scheme."

The problem, in my opinion, was the headline/leader to my letter, which was written by the editorial staff of the newspaper: *Students need immersion, not NET* (Native English Teachers). The headline was wrong on two counts:

1. "Immersion" is an ambiguous word with two, totally opposite meanings: For language education professionals, it means content-based or sheltered subject matter teaching, discussed earlier, and is

consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis. But for civilians, non language-educators, it means "submersion," doing nothing, simply plunging the language acquirer into a second language environment full of mostly incomprehensible input. This is, of course, inconsistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis. I suggest that professionals stop using this term.

2. I did not say "not NET." I said that being a native speaker of English alone is not enough. The other two requirements are very important. In a subsequent letter (July 5, 2014) I stated: "we should not prefer native speakers only because they are native speakers. A qualified local English teacher who understands pedagogy is preferable to a non-qualified native speaker." I also pointed out the confusion caused by the headline. But the headline to this letter was also confusing: "*Qualified local teachers preferable*." I asked the editor to change this to "Qualified local teachers preferable to unqualified native speakers of English." The editor declined to make this change.

## Accent

All things being equal, should we prefer a native speaker because of accent? Is having a native accent really an advantage? I think not, if the local teacher speaks English extremely well.

In fact, it is not clear that students automatically pick up the accent of their teacher: sociolinguistic studies indicate that we get our accents from our peers, not our teachers. Our accents represent the "club" we have joined or want to join (Beebe, 1985). Models other than the teacher may be members of the group the student wants to be associated with.

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Stephen D. Krashen is Emeritus Professor of Education, the University of Southern California. He is best known for his work in establishing a general theory of second-language acquisition, as the cofounder of the Natural Approach, and as the inventor of sheltered subject matter teaching. He is the author of numerous books, including *Condemned Without a Trial: Bogus Arguments Against Bilingual Education* (1999), *Every Person a Reader: An Alternative to the California Task Force Report on Reading* (1997), and *Under Attack: The Case Against Bilingual Education* (1997), all available from Heinemann.

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