

Fundamentals of Second  
 Language Acquisition Theory  
 and Its Application to Beginning  
 and Intermediate Language Teaching  
 on Stephen Krashen  
 by Ian Lamb

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**O**r everything you really wanted to know...  
 Or perhaps everything you really knew you knew but didn't quite dare to put  
 into practice...

On a plane-hop between Athens and Paris, and in one hour, Stephen Krashen, renowned - and controversial - expert in language acquisition theory, described the major research in second language acquisition over the last 10 years and propounded once again his theory that language acquisition (both first and second languages) is based on comprehensible input in a low-anxiety context.

But what style of presentation! We thought we were coming to a language conference, but we ended up with the bonus of a cross between Woody Allen and a stand-up comedian ("I saw a film once... no, I'd better not tell you about it"). It was quite simply one of the funniest lectures any of us have heard. A constant mixture of jokes, wit, irony, satire - and good humour.

But what did he actually say? ("Read my books!"). That's where the difficulty comes in. Carried away by style of presentation, we need to analyse the content of Mr Krashen's contribution. Humour can be after all a way of soliciting facile agreement.

Krashen started by outlining what he calls the **Input Hypothesis**, which he had the humility to remind us was simply a working model. Basically, it would seem that we have two different ways of gaining ability in language.

- 1) natural or subconscious acquisition which gives us a feel for correctness, and which never stops operating.

- 2) **conscious learning** through grammar, exercises and so on. This can give us the ability to censor our own utterances just before they are produced.

Few people would argue with the model so far. We do need both fluency and accuracy. Where Krashen differs from many theorists is in saying that fluency and accuracy are not the result of equal interaction between acquisition plus learning, but, at least for children, are both the result, almost exclusively, of language acquisition.

For Krashen, we acquire language when we understand messages. Demonstrating this through a series of "model" lessons which ranged from the ludicrous ("shall I say all that again louder?") to the sensible (visual aids used to transmit a simple message) Krashen showed that language acquisition is based on (his term) lots of comprehensible input. A necessary corollary of this is the necessity to reduce anxiety in the learner. If he considers he is going to be shown up, ridiculed, tested, immediately he will become impervious to learning by operating an affective filter, the blocking device which operates when motivation and self-esteem are lowered, and anxiety is heightened.

For Krashen, the role of the language class is not to produce students who are perfect in the target language, but who can be brought to a level where they can profit from access to the native language in a pedagogy-free (natural) context. Contrasting Tracy Terrofo's "natural" method of teaching with grammar-based syllabi, Krashen rejoins "comprehensive pedagogy" by showing the links between the "natural" method and notional syllabi. For him, "natural" language acquisition at the beginning and intermediate level is not at all simply a question of exposing young learners to the target language and hoping. There is still the idea of progression, of planned gradual development, but it is no longer an artificial development based on the "language points" a grammatical syllabus imposes. We don't after all switch naturally from being very interested in the past tense to being obsessed with the future simply because it's Monday morning and we've reached page 54.

The best evidence Krashen has found for the authenticity of his hypothesis (and out of which it grew) was in bilingual teaching in Canada, whereby American speaking students would gain two credits in one by following, for example, their psychology courses in French, using what the researchers in Ottawa described as Sheltered subject-matter teaching (vide Canadian Modern Language Review 1983:

article by Henry Edwards et al). Interestingly enough, in the highly competitive field of private language schools, a similar praxis seems to have achieved very encouraging results in the Lyons American Business School, where several native French students of business have gained access to American MBA courses. Other experiments seem to show that vocabulary too can be taught much quicker and more efficiently in a print-rich second language context (The Clockwork Orange Study - Singapore 1977)

It is impossible in a short review to synthesize not only the arguments, but the persuasiveness of Krashen's approach. The simplest approach would be Krashen's own: - "Read the research, read the books and think about it."

The value of Krashen's contribution to the conference was that it made such an undertaking at least worthwhile. In a situation where we know that certain students learn "despite the teacher", it would be useful to get some ideas of why this may be so, and why not then experiment with elements of practice which we all suspect are valuable, but which can't necessarily be tested immediately. Lots of short listening comprehension texts at the beginning of lessons, story-telling, following instructions - in a non anxiety-producing atmosphere. It may take, as Krashen suggests, six months to a year before we start reaping the benefit, but now that we have all got over the behaviourist approach, we may find that once again we can call on our own imagination and intuition. After all, how did you learn a foreign language? And as Jim Wingate at Pilgrims would say: "Be honest!"