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An Interview with Professor Stephen Krashen

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Stephen Krashen (born 1941) is professor emeritus at the University of Southern California. Stephen Krashen received a PhD in Linguistics from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1972. Krashen's numerous papers and books have greatly contributed to the fields of second-language acquisition, bilingual education, and reading. He is known for introducing various hypotheses related to second-language acquisition, including the acquisition-learning hypothesis, the input hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the affective filter, and the natural order hypothesis. Most recently, Krashen promotes the use of *free voluntary reading* during second-language acquisition, which he says, "is the most powerful tool we have in language education". What comes below is an interview with him by the editor of *IJLTR*. KS stands for Karim Sadeghi and SK for Stephen Krashen.

KS: You started your first teaching career some 55 years ago as a Peace Corps teacher in Ethiopia, then as an ESL instructor and a teaching assistant at the Linguistics Department of UCLA. You then completed your PhD in 1972 (the year I was born) and joined UCLA and then worked at Queens College before earning tenure at USC (University of Southern California) where you retired at 2003. You became a Professor of Linguistics in 1994 and then a Professor of Education in 2002. What does this change in professorship mean? Does it mean that you changed your department or research and/or teaching interests given that your research has focused on similar issues between 1994 and 2002, and even after that date? Would you call yourself a linguist, an applied linguist or a language educator?

SK: The change from Linguistics to the School of Education did not mean anything serious. As time went on, more and more of my students were from the School of Education, and fewer from Linguistics, partly due to the fact that the Linguistics Department was becoming more interested in theoretical grammar, the work of Chomsky and his colleagues. I support and admire this research, but it isn't what I do, at least not directly. So I simply made what was de facto into de jure. It was natural and uncontroversial. Linguistics did not banish me.

I am not an "applied linguist." I don't apply linguistic (i.e. grammatical) theory. We have built up a respectable theory of language acquisition, and we attempt to apply this theory, which provides a test of the theory.

KS: You have received nearly 15 awards at different levels from various organizations. Which one of these awards do you think are the most outstanding and why? Could you talk briefly about your best book and best paper awards that you received in 1982 and 1985, respectively? In 1986, your article 'Lateralization, language learning, and the critical period' was selected as a Citation Classic by Current Contents. Could you please clarify what kind of award this is and what it means?

SK: A meaningful award is citation by other scholars, which is what the Current Contents award was. I discovered recently that I am the most cited author in second language acquisition research, but before I start feeling good about this, I suspect that a large percentage of the citations are criticisms and attacks.

KS: You have had 530+ publications (excluding conference proceedings) within your 48 years of research activity. Of these publications, about 350 are authored by you only and the rest with your colleagues. This means that on average you have produced 11 publications every year, that is almost one per month. This is a quantity to be highly proud of and a number that beats all other numbers. Indeed more than 200 publications have appeared after your retirement when you perhaps needed more rest and were most probably not required by your institution to continue your full time writing career. Could you first of all share with us how you have managed to produce this bulk of knowledge and what sorts of issues you have promoted in your writings? It seems that you were writing around the clock. Has this left any time to attend to your social and family life? Any hobbies you have?

SK: Like most people I spend lots of time with family, and I have hobbies: music (piano) and lifting weights. I used to do martial arts but have not had time for this in the last few years.

Secrets of productivity: (1) write short papers, don't waste time with long introductions and sermons about what should be done. (2) do secondary and meta-analyses, not just primary studies. (3) with primary studies, I work with co-authors.

My post-retirement productivity is about the same as my productivity before retiring, which is typical of productive scholars. (See research on productivity and age, discussed in D. K. Simonton, 1988, *Scientific Genius: A Psychology of Science*, Cambridge University Press, chapter 4, especially pp 76-77).

KS: Your earlier publications have focused on psycho/neuro-linguistic issues such as left-right brain differences and the critical period hypothesis as well as linguistic development in children. Then you have concentrated on adult second language acquisition as well as bilingual education. And most of your recent research has centered on learning language and especially implicit learning of vocabulary through reading. You have also devoted some attention to writing but less on listening. Would you please explain if these changes in foci show shifts in your research paradigm or are these research lines related to one another connecting to a larger theme?

SK: Since 1975 my work has been mostly focused on one theme: The Comprehension Hypothesis and its related hypotheses. I have also worked in the area of writing, specifically the idea that writing does not cause language acquisition but can have a profound effect on cognitive development: writing can make you smarter. The key to this is revision and the idea that in writing, meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with (see especially Elbow, P. 1972. *Writing without Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press).

KS: Your publications introduce and some of them follow up the theories you have put forth. Some of the most famous hypotheses you have proposed are the monitor model, the input hypothesis, and the comprehension hypothesis. Could you please briefly tell us the gist of these theories and in what ways they are different from one another.

SK: I don't use the term "Monitor Model" any more, for two reasons: (1) I prefer the terms "hypothesis" and "theory" over "model": I am stating testable hypotheses which can be disproven. A "model" is a pedagogical device for understanding a concept, eg water flowing through a pipe is a model for electricity. We don't expect it to be a 100% accurate description, but it helps us understand a phenomenon. (2) The Monitor deals with the use of consciously learned grammar. It is still a major part of the theory, but it is not the only part, and is not the core: The core is the Comprehension Hypothesis.

KS: One important distinction you make in your works is the distinction between language learning and language acquisition. Could you give us more information on what the differences are and whether learning can lead to acquisition?

SK: Others have made similar distinctions in language acquisition and in other fields. When we "learn" a rule we know it consciously. "Acquisition" is a subconscious process: While it is happening, you don't know it is happening. Also, once something is acquired you are often not aware that anything has happened: The knowledge is represented subconsciously in your mind.

For linguists working in Chomskian tradition, the task of linguistics is to describe this "tacit" knowledge. This has great value for linguistic theory, but not for language education, other than showing that many rules are too complicated to consciously learn, and that there are many rules that we haven't yet described.

Traditional language teaching has assumed that learning can "become" acquisition: it assumes that we acquire language by consciously learning rules and vocabulary, practicing them over and over in output, and getting our errors corrected. This, it is assumed, eventually results in our "internalizing" the rules, and the ability to use the language. I have called this the "Skill-Building Hypothesis." It puts conscious learning at the core of language teaching.

The opposing hypothesis, the Comprehension Hypothesis, puts subconscious acquisition at the core. We acquire language by getting comprehensible input (from e.g. hearing stories, listening to what others say in conversations, reading), and this results in language acquisition. Consciously learned knowledge plays only a peripheral role: It can be used as a Monitor, or editor – we can correct our spoken or written output using consciously learned rules. (This is, however, very hard to do: to apply grammar rules, we have to know the rule, have time to apply it, and be thinking about correctness. This rarely happens in real life. It happens all the time on grammar tests, however.)

KS: What do you think is the relationship between second language acquisition and language teaching? If language teaching leads to the development of explicit knowledge, then how does language education have a role to play in second language acquisition?

SK: I think that language education is gradually changing, moving towards methods that include and sometimes even focus on interesting and comprehensible messages. The research shows they are more effective than traditional methodology and students react very positively.

KS: You have several papers and books on bilingual education. What is the main message behind these publications and how do you link bilingual education to second language acquisition?

SK: Bilingual education research links very well to current theory and supports it. First, good bilingual programs provide subject matter instruction in the first language: This knowledge helps make input in the second language more comprehensible: Consider the case of two students, each studying math in their second language: One child has a solid background in math in the first language, the other does not: Obviously the first child will do better because the input in math class is more comprehensible. This results in better math learning and more acquisition of the second language.

Bilingual education also provides literacy development in the first language, which accelerates literacy development in the second language, even when the writing systems are different. Once you can read in any language, it is easier to learn to read in any other.

Effective bilingual programs have three pillars: (1) Of course they provide comprehensible input in the second language directly, through comprehensible subject matter teaching and through encouraging a reading habit, a powerful form of comprehensible input. (2) They provide comprehensible input indirectly, by teaching subject matter in the primary language, which makes second language input more comprehensible. (3) They provide literacy development in the first language, which accelerates second language literacy development. Programs that satisfy these three conditions teach the second language very well, much better than “immersion” programs done entirely in the second language. (See McField, G. & McField, D. (2014). The consistent outcome of bilingual education programs: A meta-analysis of meta-analyses. In Grace McField (Ed.), *The Miseducation of English learners*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing (pp. 267-299).

KS: What are some of the hot topics in SLA and second language education that deserve further attention by researchers?

SK: I will mention just a few “hot topics”: compelling input, stories, and rich input.

Interesting and compelling input

Acquisition will not take place unless acquirers pay attention to the input. For this to happen, input must be not only comprehensible but at least somewhat interesting. For optimal acquisition to occur, we hypothesize that input should be VERY interesting, so interesting that the acquirer, in a sense, “forgets” that it is in another language. We call this “compelling” comprehensible input. (For a case history providing evidence for this, please see: Lao, C. and Krashen, S. 2014. Language acquisition without speaking and without study. *Journal of Bilingual Education Research and Instruction* 16(1): 215-221. <https://tinyurl.com/yalk5xx9>)

Rich input

Beniko Mason has suggested another important addition: Optimal input is “rich,” that is, it contains a great deal of language, language that contains a good supply of vocabulary and grammar. This insures that acquirers will get the input they need to progress. Daily interaction in the country where the language is spoken does not always provide rich input, a topic we return to later...

This leads to the second hot topic: the importance of stories. A remarkable fact is that everybody likes stories – in other words, everybody likes fiction (OK, nearly everybody): Children love to be read to, they love children’s TV and movies, and adults like movies and like to talk about movies (everybody in the US except me seems to be addicted to Game of Thrones).

Stories are good for you! Reading fiction has been shown to have positive effects on language (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, writing style), on knowledge (readers know more about history and science as well as “practical knowledge”), and develop desirable “habits of mind”; they are more empathic, and are more likely to avoid overly simple solutions to problems. (I have written about this in several places, eg: Krashen, S. 2015. The fiction/non-fiction debate. (Fact or fiction? The plot thickens.) *Language Magazine* 15(3): 22-27. http://www.sdkrashen.com/content/articles/2015_the_great_fiction_nonfiction_debate_krashen_.pdf)

Listening to interesting stories has become the core of beginning language teaching. In *Story Listening*, developed by Beniko Mason (demonstrations can be seen at: <https://storiesfirst.org/index.php/resources/videos/>), teachers choose stories of universal interest, identify potentially problematic language for their students, and prepare ways of making the stories more comprehensible (e.g. drawings, occasional translation, explanations and synonyms).

A particularly interesting Story Listening research finding is that making vocabulary more comprehensible results in more lasting vocabulary acquisition than time spent in direct vocabulary teaching. We are better off telling more stories than adding vocabulary exercises (See e.g. Mason, B., & Krashen, S. 2004, Is form-focused vocabulary instruction worthwhile? *RELC Journal*, 35(2), 179-185. <https://tinyurl.com/y2ezzp8k>).

Of great importance is the finding that listening to stories serves as a conduit to self-selected reading, which is the key to continuing progress in a second language.

To prepare for independent self-selected reading, Beniko Mason introduced G-SSR, guided self-selected reading. In contrast to other programs, G-SSR provides a large amount of comprehensible interesting reading of modified texts, lasting for several years. So far, research suggests that this provides a more comfortable and efficient transition to independent reading. This option is not available for most language acquirers, who are

forced to jump from boring pedagogical texts to overly demanding authentic reading very quickly. (Mason, B. 2019. Guided SSR before Self-Selected Reading, Shitennoji University Journal, 67, 445-456. beniko-mason.net)

Our progress in recent years forces us to take another look at “immersion.” Common wisdom is that “going to the country” is the best and fastest way to acquire another language. Our work predicts that in cases in which this has happened, acquirers had access to interesting, rich and comprehensible input. But this is not always the case. In fact, in some cases even intermediate level acquirers can do better by staying at home and getting interesting, and comprehensible input from listening to stories and reading. (for evidence, please see Mason, B., & Krashen, S. 2019. Hypothesis: A Class Supplying Rich Comprehensible Input is More Effective and Efficient than “Immersion.” *IBU Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 7: 83-89. <https://tinyurl.com/y4zdwmmz>). Krashen, S. 2018. Improvement on TOEFL through reading and without formal instruction: Another look at Isik (2013). *Turkish Online Journal of English Language Teaching* 3(1): 24-25. <https://tinyurl.com/ybk8j9yf>), as well as insights from successful hyperpolyglots Lomb Kato and Steven Kaufman, who come to similar conclusions about the advantages of creating your own language world, "a world of meaningful language content for me to listen to and read with pleasure" (Kaufman, cited in Krashen, S. 2017. Polyglots and the Comprehension Hypothesis. *Turkish Online Journal of English Language Teaching (TOJELT)*, 2(3), 113-119. <https://tinyurl.com/yb68ofcl>)

KS: Thank you very much for taking part in this interview.

