

# Dr. Stephen Krashen answers questions on The Comprehension Hypothesis Extended

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**S**tephen Krashen is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Southern California. He is best known for developing the first comprehensive theory of second language acquisition, introducing the concept of sheltered subject matter teaching, and as the co-inventor of the Natural Approach to foreign language teaching. He has also contributed to theory and application in the area of bilingual education, and has done important work in the area of reading. He was the 1977 Incline Bench Press champion of Venice Beach and holds a black belt in Tae Kwon Do. He is the author of *The Power of Reading* (2004) and *Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use* (2003). His recent papers can be found at < [www.sdkrashen.com](http://www.sdkrashen.com) >.



Dr. Krashen and his advisory committee

JALT's Extensive Reading SIG brought Dr. Stephen D. Krashen to the Fifth Annual Extensive Reading in Japan Seminar, and on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, he spoke to approximately 150 people at Kobe's International House. Kobe JALT's Membership Chair prepared a form for participants to write down questions for Dr. Krashen. The following questions received responses and have been modified for brevity and accuracy.

**Q1:** Will reading work for high school and junior high school students in Japan?

**Dr. Krashen (SK):** YES! In fact, self-selected reading, done over a few years, is a wonderful way to prepare for all those exams. Japan has become a major center for research in this area, thanks to Beniko Mason, Junko Yamanaka, Atsuko Takase, Rob Waring, David Beglar, Tom Robb, Akio Furukawa, and many others.

**Q2:** I have noticed that a lot of graded readers include comprehension questions and vocabulary exercises. Isn't this counter to what extensive reading is supposed to be?

**SK:** Yes, this is counter to the ideas underlying extensive reading, and for two reasons:

1. The time is much better spent reading more than answering comprehension questions or doing vocabulary exercises; (see e.g., Mason's research on efficiency, Mason & Krashen, 2004). (Exception: Some questions may stimulate thinking and discussion, resulting in cognitive development. This is possible, but I have never seen it happen from the questions I have read that follow reading selections).
2. Questioning readers on what they read promotes a strange kind of reading: Rather than being absorbed in the text, readers will read in preparation for answering questions and will try to learn and remember vocabulary while they read. The kind of reading that really counts (and in general the kind of input that counts) is COMPELLING: The message is so interesting that there is no focus on form; in fact, the reader may not even be aware of the language the text is written in (Krashen, 2011).

**Q3:** What do you think about rereading?

**SK:** It depends. If it is mechanical rereading to build fluency, I think it is a waste of time: Fluency

is a result of building reading proficiency through lots of interesting reading (Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2011). If it is rereading because the book is so wonderful the students want to read it again, it is very good. Students will acquire new grammar and vocabulary. I would never require rereading.

**Q4:** Do you have any advice for motivated students who are poor readers?

**SK:** I would first try the obvious:

- Make sure there is lots of comprehensible and COMPELLING (not just interesting) reading available (Krashen, 2011): comic books, graphic novels, magazines, and/or novels that students that age really want to read.
- Allow some time for Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), but don't require students to bring their own books. Make sure there are good things to read that are easily available.
- Don't require book reports for SSR.
- Include read-alouds of books that might be interesting as part of the class.

The main thing is lots and lots of easy, highly interesting reading.

**Q5:** What is the role of comprehensible input in speaking?

**SK:** According to the comprehension hypothesis, speaking is the result of language acquisition, not the cause. We don't learn to speak by speaking; rather, we build up the competence for speaking by listening and by reading (of course, reading alone won't do the job). This has been confirmed by a number of case histories showing that the ability to speak "emerges" gradually as a result of listening.

**Q6:** With only comprehensible input, is it possible to improve TOEFL or TOEIC scores dramatically?

**SK:** Oh yes. That's exactly what Mason (2006, 2011) has reported in a series of studies with intermediate adult EFL students in Japan. They did only free voluntary reading, with no classes and very little or no self-study. And in all cases they made very impressive gains on standardized tests (TOEFL and TOEIC).

**Q7:** Does the comprehension hypothesis work in foreign language as well as in second language situations?

**SK:** Most of the research supporting the comprehension hypothesis comes from foreign language situations, not second language. This is true

of comparisons of beginning and intermediate methods (foreign language instruction in the US), and studies of SSR.

**Q8:** There are many homeroom teachers and parents who are skeptical about the comprehensive approach and a big challenge is how to ask them to be patient. Do you have any advice on what to tell them?

**SK:** I have no advice on dealing with colleagues but here is an idea that might help parents: Offer a free intermediate advanced English class taught using comprehensible input methodology. Then they will see for themselves.

**Q9:** Do you still insist that production (speaking/writing) is not essential for learners to learn to speak or write in a foreign language?

**SK:** I know this point is contentious, but the research is very clear: Output is not essential—more writing does not result in better writing, more speaking does not result in better speaking. But speaking is helpful, because it encourages input (conversation) and makes you feel more like a member of the "club" that uses the language. And writing is a powerful means of solving problems, and thereby making yourself smarter (Krashen, 1994, 2003).

**Q10:** What should writing center counselors be advising students of?

**SK:** There is a limit to how much we can help students write more accurately in the short run. Only a few aspects of the written language are teachable and learnable. Of course in the long term, it is wide reading that is responsible for developing writing style. Writing center counselors can, however, help students understand how to use writing to make themselves smarter and solve problems, in other words, help them master the composing process (Best source = the work of Peter Elbow, e.g., Elbow, 1972). Understanding the composing process has helped me tremendously. Please also see the articles on writing on my website at <[www.sdkrashen.com/index.php?cat=3](http://www.sdkrashen.com/index.php?cat=3)>.

**Q11:** Does phonics help second language acquirers?

**SK:** The assumption is that since phonics has been shown to be helpful in first language development, it will be helpful in second language development. But this assumption is not fully correct.

We have to distinguish two kinds of phonics instruction: Intensive, systematic phonics, in which we teach all the major rules in a strict order to all students; and basic phonics, in which we teach only the straightforward rules, rules that both teachers and students can remember and actually apply to texts to make them more comprehensible. In English, basic phonics consists of the most frequent pronunciation of initial consonants (e.g., the first “b” in “bomb” but not the last one) and the most frequent pronunciation of vowels.

There are two reasons to reject intensive systematic phonics: (1) The system that must be consciously learned has too many rules, the rules are too complex, and the rules have too many exceptions; (2) Intensive systematic phonics instruction doesn’t help in reading for meaning.

As Smith (2003) notes, many phonics rules are “unreliable ... there are too many alternatives and exceptions ... 300 ways in which letters and sounds can be related” (p. 41). His most famous example is the fact that each of these uses of “ho” has a different pronunciation: hot, hoot, hook, hour, honest, house, hope, honey, and hoist. Smith points out that even if a reader knew the rules, these words cannot be read accurately from left to right, letter by letter: The reader needs to look ahead.

Some have claimed that the rules of phonics that appear not to work very well can be repaired and should be taught, but attempts to state better generalizations have resulted only in more complex rules that are only slightly more efficient (Krashen, 2002).

Let me suggest a simple procedure: If the teacher has to look up the rule before coming to class, that rule is too complex to teach. If the teacher doesn’t remember it, the students won’t remember it either.

Intensive, systematic phonics instruction does not help children in real reading. The impact of intensive phonics is clear on tests in which children pronounce lists of words in isolation, but it is not significant on tests in which children have to understand what they read. Thus, intensive phonics instruction only helps children develop the ability to pronounce words in isolation, an ability that will emerge anyway with more reading (Garan, 2002; Krashen, 2009).

**Q12:** Does “immersion” help second language acquirers?

**SK:** “Immersion” is a confusing term and can be used in at least three ways:

1. “Immerse” yourself in the language by interacting with speakers. This will help if you are already an intermediate and can understand at least some authentic input. It won’t help beginners.
2. A special program in which subject matter is taught through the second language. I refer to this as “sheltered” subject matter teaching and it can work very well if students are intermediates (who can understand the instruction)
3. A program similar to (2) but any use of the student’s first language is forbidden. This is not desirable: Use of the first language can help if it helps make input more comprehensible, that is, by providing background information. (It can delay progress if it is used instead of the second language, that is, for translation).

**Q13:** Have you ever seen Washoe (the chimpanzee who acquired an impressive amount of sign)?

**SK:** No I haven’t, but my daughter and son-in-law visited Washoe before she died and communicated with her using sign. I hope to meet Cosmo, the amazing talking parrot: Betty Jean Craig has invited me to her home to meet Cosmo next time I am in Athens, Georgia. (For a description of what Cosmo can do, see Craig, 2010).

**Q14:** Have any studies been done into the effect of peer correction?

**SK:** There are no studies demonstrating that peer correction, or non-peer correction, has a lasting effect. In many studies, correction has no effect. When it has an effect, it is small, and only occurs when the conditions for Monitor use are met, confirming that correction influences conscious learning, not acquisition. In my opinion, the most compelling papers on the impact of correction have been written by John Truscott (1996, 1999, 2004, 2005).

**Q15:** How can we control for the influence of out-of-class/in-class variables in research?

**SK:** Even with studies using experimental and control groups, there are variables that cannot be measured or controlled. One way to deal with this is to keep doing lots of studies. If 25 studies are done, and the conditions are slightly different in each one (different teachers, time of day, amounts of outside reading, etc.), we can be confident that our results are valid. The interest-

ing thing about self-selected or extensive reading is that we keep getting the same results in both correlational studies and in case studies.

**Q16:** What research directions would you advise? What should research be measuring?

**SK:** The research so far has been very, very impressive. Free Voluntary Reading/Extensive Reading works in a wide variety of situations, and lots of different measures have been used. I am most excited about cases in which language acquirers only read for pleasure, and show dramatic gains, without study, studies of the kind Mason (2006) has done. And of course it would be good to see if extensive reading works with other target languages. I know of only one study that has looked at this, done by Hitosugi and Day (2004).

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