

Stephen Krashen and Language Acquisition

Outcome: Become familiar with the most influential linguists in second language acquisition and their theories.

Krashen hypothesizes that second language acquisition is very similar to the process children use when acquiring their first language. It requires meaningful interaction in the new language--natural communication--in which speakers are concerned with the messages they are conveying and understanding, not with the grammatical form of the language.

According to Krashen, error correction and explicit teaching of rules are not important in language acquisition. Rather, students learn best when they are focusing on the purpose of communicating, not the form of the language.

Native speakers of a language, when interacting with non-native speakers, naturally modify their speech into shorter, less complex sentences to help second language learners understand. In the literature, this type of language is commonly referred to as "*foreigner talk*."

Mothers also naturally modify their speech into shorter, less complex sentences, using pitch and intonation to help their babies learn their first language. In the literature, this type of language is commonly referred to as "*motherese*."

Modifications of language that occur during foreigner talk and motherese are thought to help the acquisition process, because language is being made more comprehensible to the learner.

Krashen is most widely known for his "*comprehensible input*" hypothesis, which suggests that learners acquire language by taking in and understanding language that is "just beyond" their current level of competence.

Krashen defines comprehensible input as ' $i+1$ ', where ' i ' is the current level of proficiency and ' $+1$ ' is the level of proficiency just beyond the learner's current level. As evidence of "*comprehensible input*", Krashen points to examples of "foreigner talk" and "motherese" as being instances of input that is slightly beyond the learner's current level of competence.

For instance, a preschool child already understands the phrase "Get your crayon." By slightly altering the phrase to "Get my crayons please," the teacher can provide an appropriate challenge— offering new information that builds off prior knowledge. Because it is only slightly different, it is comprehensible.

Reflection:

*Can you think of learning experiences in your life that involve $i+1$?
Instances where your skills can only improve with the input of something slightly above your comfort level?*

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis is another concept that has found wide acceptance with both researchers and ELL instructors. This theory suggests that an individual's emotions can directly assist or interfere with the learning of a new language. According to Krashen, learning a new language is different from learning other subjects because it requires public practice.

Speaking out in a new language can result in anxiety, embarrassment, or anger. These negative emotions can create a kind of filter that blocks the learner's ability to process new or difficult words.

Classrooms that are fully engaging, non-threatening, and affirming of a child's native language and cultural heritage can have a direct effect on the student's ability to learn by increasing motivation and encouraging risk taking. These conditions "lower" the affective filter that can block learning.

Krashen's language acquisition theories can be summarized as:

- Learners acquire language when exposed to "comprehensible input," i.e., language that is a step beyond their current level of language proficiency ($i+1$).
- The emotions of a language learner can interfere or assist with language acquisition.
- Classrooms need to be engaging and non-threatening to increase motivation and encourage risk taking.

Reflection:

What steps do you currently take to ensure English Language Learners feel comfortable taking risks in your classroom? What can you do to increase their comfort and risk taking?