

Foundations for Story-Listening: Some Basics

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Abstract

This short paper is intended to describe our current progress, the conclusions reached over the last few decades. These conclusions are not “proven fact” but are hypotheses. As such, they can be disproven tomorrow. Thus far, however, these generalizations have survived quite well with a considerable amount of supporting evidence, and no counterevidence. (Representative studies that provide this supporting evidence are cited in this paper, but this is not an exhaustive review.) We claim that the best way to ensure progress in a second language is to provide “optimal input,” input that is comprehensible, highly interesting, and provides large quantities of rich second language input. Thus far, it appears that Story-Listening and Self-Selected Pleasure Reading meet these requirements. Stories can be made comprehensible to second language acquirers through the use of Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation applied to words and phrases that acquirers may have difficulty understanding (Krashen, Mason, & Smith, 2018). The goal is not immediate mastery of new vocabulary but is to make the story more comprehensible. Of interest is the finding that this approach leads to better vocabulary acquisition than traditional methods. Story-Listening provides a conduit, a passageway so to speak, to pleasure reading, a powerful means of developing language and literacy. Pleasure reading is introduced by guiding students to read large quantities of undemanding texts. The goal of Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading is to help students establish a pleasure reading habit, ensuring progress long after students complete their language course.

Keywords

Second Language Acquisition, Optimal Input Hypothesis, Vocabulary, Story-Listening, (Guided) Self-Selected Reading.

Introduction

Our progress in understanding second language acquisition in the last 45 years is based on the hypothesis that we have two different ways of improving our language competence: We can ACQUIRE language and we can LEARN language. Language acquisition is subconscious: While it is happening, we are not aware that it is happening, and after we have acquired something, we are not always aware that this has happened: The knowledge is represented subconsciously in our minds. Human beings are very good at acquiring language (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985, 2003).

We are not very good at LEARNING languages. Learning is what we did in school: It means studying and memorizing rules of grammar and vocabulary. When we talk about “rules” and “grammar” in everyday language, we are usually talking about “learning.”

We have concluded that language acquisition happens in only one way: When we understand what we hear and what we read. Traditional language teaching is based on the assumption that we first need to LEARN grammar and vocabulary by study, practice speaking and writing, and get our errors corrected.

In our view, this has never worked! There are no cases of people mastering languages through conscious learning alone, despite heroic efforts (see. e.g., the case of Gouin, described in Krashen (2014).

Consciously learned language is of limited use. Here is why:

- 1) We can't “learn” more than a small percentage of the rules of language; in fact, professional linguists have not succeeded in describing more than a few of the rules of language.
- 2) In order to apply the rules we have learned, we need to be *thinking about correctness, or “focused on form.”* It is very hard to do this when we are concerned with what we are saying or writing, or the meaning of what we are hearing or reading.
- 3) We need *time* to access and retrieve our conscious knowledge and time to apply the rules we have learned to our speech. Normal conversation generally does not provide enough time to do this. In fact, the only time these conditions are met is when *we take a grammar test*, and even then, grammar use is far from perfect (Krashen, 1981).

We have concluded that the profession has confused cause and effect in language teaching: Mastery of vocabulary and grammar, as well as fluency, is the RESULT of language acquisition, not the cause.

The Natural Order

Study after study has confirmed that we acquire (not learn) the rules of language in a predictable order. Some rules come early, and some come later (or in some cases may

not be acquired at all) (Krashen, 1981). It appears to be the case that we cannot change the order by diligent study and drill (Krashen, 1985, chapter 2).

We have concluded that *the “natural order” is not the syllabus*. Language will be acquired in a predictable order if we supply enough of the right kind of input. It will not help to “take aim” at the next item we think students are ready for and provide lots of input containing that item. Given enough of the right kind of input (see below), language will be acquired with maximum efficiency and speed, along the natural order (Krashen, 2013).

Optimal input

We have hypothesized that “the right kind of input” has these characteristics (Krashen & Mason, 2020):

- 1) It is comprehensible: This does not mean it is 100% transparent, that listeners and readers understand every word, and every aspect of every word (e.g., affixes). We can tolerate some “*noise*” in input, some parts of language that have not yet been acquired. In fact, if the input is interesting enough (see below), we may not even notice the noise.
- 2) It is interesting. Even better, it is VERY interesting, or compelling, so interesting that listeners/readers “*forget*” that it is in another language (Krashen, Lee, & Lao, 2017).
- 3) It is rich: It contains details that move the story along and/or make the text clearer.
- 4) It is abundant: Language is acquired *gradually*; studies show that we acquire only a small amount of the form and meaning of unacquired items each time we hear or read them in a comprehensible context (Nagy, Herman & Anderson, 1985). We thus require abundant input.

Optimal input, we hypothesize, contains sufficient quantities of the grammatical structures and vocabulary that language acquirers are ready to acquire (“i+1”).

Listening to stories and self-selected reading can satisfy these conditions, and research confirms that listening to stories and reading books the reader is genuinely interested in results in substantial language development (Krashen, 2004). This has been confirmed by numerous studies of first and second language acquisition involving many different groups of readers and listeners (Krashen, 2011).

There is a growing tendency in second language teaching to use *stories* in beginner level classes. The most promising use of stories is Story-Listening, originally used for English as a foreign language in Japan and now in use in several places through the world (Mason, 2020a).

In Story-Listening, stories are selected that have “stood the test of time” and are easily available on the internet, e.g., Grimms’ Fairy Tales. To prepare, the story-teller makes a list of words and expressions that he or she thinks will not be fully understood by

students in the class from the context of the story, and plans to use “comprehension-aiding supplementation” that will help make the text more comprehensible.

Comprehension-aiding supplementation (CAS) does not consist of pre-teaching vocabulary but attempts to make new items more comprehensible by including drawings, gestures, explanations, and occasional brief translations (Krashen, Mason, & Smith, 2018).

The Optimal Order of CAS Application

According to our experience, the use of the following CAS strategies, in the order presented below (Mason, 2020b), works very well to make unfamiliar words, and hence stories in which they appear, more comprehensible.

Let us assume that the unfamiliar word is “aged.”

Step one: Before presenting the target word, present the meaning of the prompted word by using *a synonym* (or phrase) that the students already know. For example: There was a man. He was old. Draw picture of a man, perhaps bent over with a long beard.

Step two: Use a known word or phrase with the *opposite* meaning, for example: “He was *not young*.”

Step three: Repeat the first step with different language. E.g., “He was *95 years old*.”

Step four: Use additional words with similar meanings, even if the words are only partially known by the listeners. “He was *elderly*. He had *wrinkles* around his eyes.” Draw a picture of a face with wrinkles around the eyes.

Step five: Use the target word: “He was an *aged* man.” Write it on the board.

In Story-Listening, students listening to the story do not attempt to “*master*” the target words, are not encouraged to “study” them by making lists or review them with flash cards. The only goal of the five steps is better understanding of the story.

These steps are not used for every new word introduced. Often only a drawing, just one kind of comprehension-aiding supplementation (CAS), is sufficient. Sometimes only one synonym, another kind of CAS, is enough, as is a gesture, or a facial expression. Also, the order of the steps may not always be as it is presented here. Even when it is in agreement with the content of the five steps, the process may take place in a different order. A human teacher is not a robot. These steps are a suggestion.

In some classes, teachers provide additional skill-building exercises assuming it will help students “*solidify*” their knowledge of the new words. The time, however, appears to be better spent listening to more stories. Students will gain more total words when they do vocabulary exercises after listening to a story, but these exercises take time. In terms of total time spent, story listening is more efficient: Students gain more words per minutes from stories than from stories followed by exercises (e.g., Mason & Krashen, 2004). And needless to say, listening to stories is far more interesting than doing exercises. Table one presents the results from Mason and Krashen (2004). Table 2 and 3

present the results two replication studies from Clarke (2019, 2020). The delayed posttests were given 5 weeks later.

Table 1. Words acquired per minute (Mason & Krashen, 2004)

	Gain	Time	Efficiency
Story only (n=27)	3.8	15''	0.25 wpm
Story + study (n=31)	11.4	70''	0.16 wpm

Table 2: From Clarke (2019, page 158).

	Gain	Time	Efficiency
Story only (n=8)	4.6	25''	0.18 wpm
Story + study (n=6)	7.7	68''	0.11 wpm

Table 3. From Clarke (2020, page 6)

	Gain	Time	Efficiency
Story only (n=15)	4.60	25''	0.18 wpm
Story + study (n=14)	4.35	64''	0.07 wpm

Story-Listening leads to the next stage, reading. Our eventual goal is to help students develop a pleasure reading habit. There is consistent evidence that *self-selected pleasure reading* is by far the best way to acquire vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and writing style (Krashen, 2004).

In the Guided Self-Selected program (Mason, 2019) teachers help second language readers in book selection, and large quantities of easy reading are made available. In these programs, beginning readers may read hundreds of comprehensible texts before moving to “authentic” literature. Our studies confirm that this approach results in spectacular growth in language (Mason & Krashen, 2017).

For such a program to work, students must have access to a large selection of books. Mason’s students in Japan had access to 5000 books, which seems like a lot, but not so much in view of the wide range of interests and reading levels of students.

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