

Chapter 1 Comprehensibility

The cause of anxiety in language acquisition is incorrect pedagogy, which results in false personal theories of language acquisition and inaccurate expectations.

Interesting input lowers affective filter. Compelling input destroys affective filter.

Interesting input decreases the urge to focus on form. Compelling input destroys the urge to focus on form."

The personalization hypothesis: Personalization is one way to make input compelling. –

Dr. Stephen Krashen

Language must be 100% comprehensible to be acquired.

When the language is 100% comprehensible, acquisition is effortless and involuntary. Acquisition is “picking up” a language. What we know about language acquisition is that it is achieved through comprehensible input. That is that we understand what we hear and read.

We acquire our second language in the same way we acquired our first. We hear messages that we understand and we focus only on the meaning.

Stephen Krashen calls this the Comprehension Hypothesis: the claim that we acquire language and develop literacy when we understand messages.

70% of communication is non-verbal. Messages that are communicated in context, with appropriate voice inflection, body language, facial expression and eye contact can be made entirely comprehensible. Any inclination we have to communicate in less than 100% comprehensible language is unnatural and we must remember that it leads to frustration and actually inhibits language acquisition. This places the responsibility on the language learner to indicate when comprehension drops below 100%.

What can we do to insure that we are teaching effectively? First, we must teach to the bottom of the class. Teaching to the top of the class guarantees that the rest of the class will be receiving less than 100% comprehensible input.

Foreign language teachers tend to speak incomprehensibly, believing that it's valuable to expose their students to the language in its most natural form. We believe it's important that they work to decipher messages. Most of us would not describe our classrooms as environments where language acquisition is effortless and involuntary, and yet this is the best pathway to learning languages.

Grammar and pleasure

In 1971 50% of students who signed up for level 1 of a language went on to level 2. 15% of those original level 1 students continued to level 3 and only 4% continued to level 4. This information was cited within Learning Another Language Through Actions by James Asher. ACTFL places that final figure at closer to 6% now. Something is dreadfully wrong with our foreign language programs if we continue to use the same methods and defend those methods when faced with a 94% failure rate. Even the anecdotal evidence is irrefutable. When we sit down on an airplane the passengers with whom we converse confess to having taken a language in high school but being unable to speak a word.

Most of us learned our language skills because, in our hearts, we are grammar lovers. We adore grammar books in all languages. We could talk for hours about the importance of the subjunctive. It lights us up. What we fail to realize is that we are the "4%ers", the 4% of the population who enjoy analyzing language. Stephen Krashen jests, "Normal people get their pleasures elsewhere." Our students will not acquire language in the same way. They are more likely to acquire their second language the way they acquired their first than to acquire language the way we did. Occasionally we will have a student who asks for more grammar instruction. We should, of course, provide it. We may find we have a common adoration for complex and obscure grammar rules. Most of our students, though, will acquire what carries meaning first and add new words and structures in a more natural order, an order more similar to the map that has already been created in their brains by their parents from when they acquired their first language.

Breaking the OUTPUT habit

Foreign Language teachers habitually spend time creating exercises, activities and worksheets designed to elicit feedback, participation and output from our students. Output does not lead to language acquisition. Output is the result, not the cause. We should look to output for evidence of

quality input, but stopping frequently to measure the output through homework assignments, worksheets and tests only undermines our ability to make the most of the available class time we have. We have approximately 150 hours of contact time per school year per class. We need to optimize that amount of time and use as much of it as possible for comprehensible input. When we do assign homework, it should be in the form of input, as well. Reading is the most legitimate and, perhaps, the only legitimate homework assignment.

Teaching in a way that is completely understandable to our students, nearly eliminating output and explicit grammar instruction, will not make us bad teachers. On the contrary, this is the definition of student-centered instruction.

Stephen Krashen, in *Free Voluntary Web Surfing*, published in the *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, Summer 2007, says, “In previous publications, I have also hypothesized that input needs to be interesting for acquisition to take place optimally; high interest ensures that the acquirer will actually pay attention to the input. I now suspect that “interesting” is not enough: the input has to be compelling, so interesting that all attention is focused on the message and thoughts of anxiety do not even occur, so interesting that the acquirer “forgets” that the input is in another language.”

Personalization is the key to making input interesting and compelling, and is the key to effective instruction and long- term retention.