FREE VOLUNTARY READING: AN INTERVIEW WITH DR STEPHEN D. KRASHEN[1]



Dr Thomas H. Schmidt and Elena Ayala Tello

Universidad Católica de San Antonio de Murcia (Spain)

tschmidt@ucam.edu

Professor Stephen D. Krashen, born in 1941in Chicago, Illinois, is professor emeritus at the University of Southern California and an expert on linguistics. In 1994 he decided to move from the Department of Linguistics to the Department of Education, focusing his research on second language acquisition (SLA). As a researcher, he has published more than 500 articles, books and other papers in the field of SLA, bilingual education and reading. Every university student studying second language acquisition knows his name. His most important papers are about hypotheses related to second language acquisition. Nowadays, at the age of 75, Professor Krashen keeps on researching and promoting his theories, the latest about free voluntary reading and its powerful influence in SLA. He is also an agile and energetic activist against United States Educational Policy and he daily writes his opinion in different blogs.

I: Professor Krashen, you are now professor emeritus, but as far as we know, you haven't stopped researching. What are the topics you are working on at present?

S.K: Well, a lot of things, but what I'd like to do is to review for you the last 35 years of my life, and it says "two views of language and literacy development".

The last 35 years, I have been at war. And it's a good war, because whatever side wins, we are learning something. It's the war between two hypotheses about language acquisition.

The hypothesis of what I think is right is the comprehension hypothesis, which says that we acquire language when we understand it. Here is the important point: first, you get what we call "comprehensible input". For example, you'll listen to stories, you'll read good books, you'll have interesting conversations... The results are the skills.

The rival hypothesis is skill-building, which reverses the causality. First, study your grammar, study your vocabulary, learn your grammar, practice the rules in writing and have people correct your mistakes. And if you do that enough, and you do it over and over again, until it becomes automatic, someday, you can use the language. We call this the "delayed gratification hypothesis".

But the gratification never comes. In my opinion, not a single human being on this planet has ever acquired language through skill-building. It has never worked. And this is what research tells us: when we compare skill-building and comprehension, comprehension has won; it has never lost.

Comprehensible input is pleasant. It must be pleasant or it doesn't work. For people to pay attention to the input, the input has to be interesting. Skill-building is painful. My impression is that the 95% of our students in grammar focused classes hate it. The 5% who like it, become language teachers. You see the problem.

[1] Stephen D. Krashen kindly accepted our request for an interview when visiting the Catholic University San Antonio of Murcia.

So, comprehension hypothesis is win-win, the skill-building hypothesis is lose-lose. The problem is this: for the public, the skill-building hypothesis is not a hypothesis. It's an axiom. Most people are not aware that there is an alternative. They think the skill-building hypothesis is the only possibility. Even people in the profession of education. If you believe in skill-building, all the ways that we torture children in school make sense. All the grammar activities, all the repetition, all the testing over and over again, it makes perfect sense, but my idea, my impression is that it's not true.

I: So, it is input, but what kind of input do we need for our students?

S.K: Well, this brings us up to the present and my latest speculation, or better to say, conjecture. The best input is not just interesting, it's very interesting. It's compelling, in other words, so interesting that you forget everything else. It is exactly equivalent to the concept of "flow", F-L-O-W. Csíkszentmihályi came up with this; it's a brilliant idea.
When you're in a state of flow, the world disappears around you. Your sense of time is altered; your sense of self is diminished; only the activity counts. When this happens in language, acquisition happens at top efficiency and you are not even aware what language you are listening to or reading in.

I: In your latest articles you concentrate on reading and its benefits in foreign language acquisition. Do you believe reading is essential in second language acquisition?

S.K: Yes, for sure, give them a book to read in English, that's really interesting and they will acquire English, whether they want to or not. In other words: language acquisition is the result of doing something else. Getting compelling comprehensible input. This changes our work enormously and makes it much more interesting and much easier.

I: You call it the reading hypothesis in your articles. Could you explain a bit more about this theory?

S.K: Yes, for sure. The reading hypothesis is a special case of the input hypothesis and the reading hypothesis says most of our literate background. Most of our literate competence in first and second language comes from reading. And it comes from a certain kind of reading. The kind of reading you may did last night, before you went to sleep. You read, even though you should sleep, you know, but you still can't stop reading.
This is reading-addiction! The kind of reading that really counts, reading we do obsessively all the time. We call it "free voluntary reading". Reading because you want to. No book reports, no questions at the end of the chapter. You don't like the book, you put it down and you pick up another one. That's what counts. Reading with no accountability. The kind of reading that is often disrespected and distained at school. That we are reading, junk reading, otherwise known as *basura*, it's the only thing that helps.
To me, pleasure reading, light reading, is the link between conversational and academic language. It is the most powerful tool we have in all of language education. I want to give you some of the evidence for this and I'm going to give you only the newest evidence. If you want the old evidence, it's all on my webpage.[2]
And, there's one factor that everybody forgets: access to books. Without access to books, nobody is going to read. My hypothesis is: with access to books, nearly everyone is going to read if it's stuff they are interested in. Everybody likes stories, everybody has an interest; if the books are there, they are going to read them. And I found this in an interpreting study: when the books are available, and they are interesting, it may not be things we want to read. It may be comic books; it may be books about sports... Who knows? But you find the

[2] Prof. St. D. Krashen's webpage: www.sdkrashen.com.

interest. That's why I always emphasize first language development and general education.

I: But what does it mean for us as teachers of second languages like English at school, or others working in the so called bilingual education?

S.K: What I said, I always emphasize first language development; general education.
Let's get very philosophical. Everybody is different. Have you noticed that? We're all different. And our job in life is to find out how we are different. What our special talent is. Education should help students do that. Marc Twain said: "The two most important days of your life: the day you are born and the day you discover why".
The solution is to help children find their interest and the world will find a use for them. It will be something we don't know.
So, what we want at school is not to worry about society's needs but to help students find their interest. One way we do this; one way you find your interest is through your hobbies; another is through reading. And you have to give kids lots of choice. Let them find their interest, let them discover something they want.
So my answer to you is: number one, make sure the books are there. Make sure they have a good education in the first language, which is designed to help them discover their interest and their special job in life. We have to have diversity! If everyone did the same thing, we would not be prepared...
So, we're all different, we have to be, otherwise we're not prepared for change. Find out, your kids are different, I guarantee it. Find their interest, once they start reading, you won't be able to stop them. We need to acquaint: good educators in the first language, which will help them discover their interest and huge amounts of things to read, access to the internet, so they can find things, they can surf and they'll be reading. A long answer to a short question.

I: Sorry, but we believe that many of our students don't like reading. And they do have access to books, so isn't it a bit simplistic view talking about access to books?

S.K: They don't have access to books that they're interested in. Do they ever read magazines? Do the boys read magazines about cars and skateboarding and karate? Do the girls read magazines like Cosmopolitan and beauty magazines? Do they read those? They like reading. They just don't want to read Shakespeare. Which I don´t either!

I: Yes, but ...

S.K: No but, just one tenth of 1% of the human race is interested in classic literature. Hum, Mark Twain defined "a classic" as a "book people wish they had read but they don't want to read". You must start with the present. By the way, these magazines are very interesting.

I: So, we were wondering how we could help them to approach that free search for reading.

S.K: Yes... Good question! It's a stage process. There are three stages. Stage one starts with classes of the kind of TPRS.[3] The second stage is about free voluntary reading in general. The work we're doing is going right to stage three which is about the students, about their daily life, their personalities. That's what they're missing.
The good thing about literature today is that we have a lot of literate - we have a lot in English that's designed for language students called "graded readers". And I would have a library of thousands of graded readers: I would have the Oxford, the Cambridge... That's the only thing that publishers have done right, in my opinion; having graded readers. And they don't have to do them in order; they don't

[3] Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling is a content-based method of instruction which emphasizes L2 input and strives for language acquisition as its main goal. It was invented by Blaine Ray, a Spanish teacher in California in 1990. It combines theories of Dr James Asher (Total Physical Response) and Dr Stephen D. Krashen (Language Acquisition Strategies) (Ray &Seely, 2004).

have to answer the questions in the back. Just have thousands of them and let them read. If they like it, it doesn't matter if its fiction or non-fiction. Then we can move to easy authentic reading.

Young people's literature is better than it's ever been. It's better than adult bestsellers. So I would look at young people's literature because it's so good. It's quality. And I would look at graphic novels; I would look at comic books, and let them go crazy with this! I know you don't have time, but there's no short cut. You can't go any other way. They'll gradually have the competence to start reading in their own specialized areas. There's no other solution and it's fun!

They have to find the easiest texts in the subjects they like. And this is sometimes elementary school books.

You've asked exactly the right question; you've proposed exactly the correct challenge that the profession needs to answer. We're trying to do it right. The problem is finding the right text. So, it's a great question, thank you.

I: What about using the Internet in this case? Do you recon free voluntary reading on the Internet?

S.K: Yes. We call it *free voluntary surfing*. Now, anyway, the *free voluntary surfing* is the latest idea for my research group. My student and I had been doing papers on this. They took English as a foreign language to adult students in Taiwan. And they told them to surf in the net and just ask them to do track the articles. They could follow their own interests. And they found out that students were very good at finding their own interests and since it was narrow on the same topic, it was highly comprehensible. And they had gains in vocabulary, about the same as reading books. So one way they go around this class, is involving them in free voluntary surfing, reporting back to us what they found. Which articles are interesting, following narrow, which makes it more... Makes it more selective, more comprehensible.

I: And what's your opinion about audio books?

S.K: I love them. It's great, it's phenomenal. Yes, the same thing, I haven't enough but thanks for bringing it up! I think it's magnificent! I think they are the future, I think it's like free voluntary surfing, for fiction; I think we should allow them, encourage them... Wonderful! There is no evidence that audio books discourage reading. In fact, the first thing I did, I heard it in English first and I realized I just needed something to listen to. Books in Spanish and then, I totally forgot and how. Wow, this author is good. And then I read the original. I couldn't wait to read it in Spanish! Now, I'll read the rest of her stuff because it is just brilliant. It gets you into other things. Who use computers, there's a small, positive correlation with reading in general. So I think it's something we can exploit. And you, people don't have time to sit down in front of books anymore. The studies in the States show that people use audio books when they drive and when they exercise. You know, I go for long walks all the time, that's the perfect place for audio books. So I say: "Let's push them hard". We need them to be simpler now. We need comprehensible audio books.

Otherwise, let me give some advice on audio books when they do come here. Don't get audio books read by the author. Because the authors generally have no idea. Don't get audio books read by famous actors. Cause they are just too self-important. Find actors that are not quite famous like e minus, b plus; they are fantastic. They work on it, they study it, and they become heroes of the audio book world. There are some audio books I would listen to only because I've heard the same person read before, like Jim Dale, who does Harry Potter novels British. He is not a famous actor but he became famous because of Harry Potter. It's amazing. Good question, thanks.

I: Just about the last question. Would you recommend podcasts maybe as a teaching tool?

S.K: Yeah... Let me put in a commercial now for *ESL Podcasts*, I think they are good. This was

organized by two of my former students. Jeff McQuillen and Lucy Tse. Here it is what they have done, and it's brilliant. A podcast, if you go to their website, is ESL pods or something like that... They have huge selections of stories and discussions of lots of topics spoken a little bit slower. They distribute them for free. They have – last time I talked to Jeff – they had 15.000 people. This is for people who have studied English in school, to confidence it's perfect. They then say if you want the text, there's a slight charge. And if 1% of the people get the text then they can have money to keep going. So I think they have a brilliant model, a good case that we talked about, ethical capitalism, it's really good and inexpensive.

I: Would you call that *free* voluntary listening?
S.K: Yes, of course! Yes, yes, just listening. Precisely.

I: Reading, listening and more if it's voluntary and compelling, but what about motivation to learn a foreign language itself?
S.K: Motivation, this is the end of what we call "motivation"to learn a language. It doesn't exist. It's only the motivation to follow an interesting story, read a good book and have a really good conversation.

I: Thank you. So it's reading and conversation as well, you said. Conversation means speaking and this is a problem we find every day in our classes. The question is how to motivate students to speak in the foreign language learned.
S.K: Oh, my God! The worst! I've got to give you more stories! I've looked at the literature and the most anxiety provoking activity in class is having to speak.
It's not only difficult to have a silent period with your friends. It's ten times as hard if you're in class. If I take a language class and I'm called on, I get anxious. Don't you?
We all do. That's why in our TPRS classes, for example, we don't require a lot of speaking. We make sure that you can answer in one or few words or just using a name.
That's my suggestion: keep the speaking demands very, very low. That is all we need to do. The ethic is secure. Take your time and lower the demands. And the experiment I would like you to do, the observation is to look at the ones who have been there for a while and see what happens if somebody of them is talking. They usually do talk if they find a good friend. That's the secret weapon.
So, I'm not worried about your students not speaking. I would leave them alone; they're in a *silent period*.[4] If they are understanding, that's what counts. We acquire language from comprehension. I would build more and more comprehension. They can be quiet for a year, it doesn't matter. It's there. What we do in cases like this, with small children, we look what happens in small places, at the playground. Sometimes, they are communicating in the playground but not in class. So we allow the silent period to happen. Lots of cases dress like this!
I would leave the students alone and you can let them answer in their mother tongue or their friends could translate. And they will get a little better too. I would leave them alone, let it come with time. They will speak. They just don't do it right away...

I: There are different theories focusing on how students acquire new information and how they learn. As we have talked about the importance of motivation and communication, we'd like to add that in many schools we are trying to foment *Problem Based Learning*, which is known for increasing motivation, and you said that one of the main keys for improving is the interest in solving problems, isn't it?

[3] Silent period is a period of time when students do not speak at all. Traditionally in Total Physical Response this important period lasts from a few hours to several weeks (Ray & Seely, 2004).

S.K: That's the only way we grow competitively. It's not language, its competitive development.

I: So what do you have in mind...?
S.K: The problem has to be something that burns inside of you. It gets you out of the bed in the morning that you can'twait to work on it. We are all dealing with these problems, all the time. My life has been one problem after another. And I can't wait to work on it and solve it. It's going to be different for everybody, that's the problem. I can't change that.
So, it's the students who generate a new brand new class. Not easy. I don't know any other pattern. My suggestion is when you do solve it in your class and your class generates interesting solutions to problems, share them with other teachers. Share your ideas. Use the Internet.

I: Another aspect we are concerned about as teachers is how to evaluate our students. What do you think of grammar testing, grammar accuracy and the correction of student's mistakes?
S.K: I am concerned with accuracy, contrary to popular opinion. I want maximum grammatical accuracy. The way to get it is comprehensible input. Not by correcting mistakes. Not by grammar. The problem with grammar is this: I'm not against grammar teaching. I would never say: "Teach grammar, go to jail."
The problem is, it's hard to learn and it's hard to use. Grammar is limited. That's the problem. If you want students to understand grammar, then use grammar. Three conditions have to be meant. And this is in my early writings. And they are very daunting, difficult conditions. You've got to know the rule. The linguists don't know all the rules. People who write grammar books know less, the best grammar teachers know less, the best students don't understand everything we tell them; they don't remember the rules that we teach them.
And this is not kids these days, this is the earliest study done in 1912. At that time teachers already complaint that kids don't know the rules. They never know the rules; they are too hard. Only crazy people like us are interested in these rules. All right? So, you've got another rule and that's limiting. You've got to be thinking about the rules... It's hard to do. It's kind of like... doing this... You know, doing two things at once... We're not designed to think about accuracy when we speak. It's unnatural. Also, you have to have time to apply the rules. By the time you do that, your conversation partner is going.
Those three conditions are tough. The only time they are meant, in general, is when we give people grammar tests. And our studies, I wrote this book back in... a long time ago, rather in 1981. *Second language acquisition, second language learning.* It's on the website; you can download it for free. The subtitle is "The cure for some men". Anyway... And one of the conclusions is, based on our studies: people don't use grammar very much. You will only make use of it obviously when you give them grammar tests. So, a grammar test. How do you like that? There's another place you can use grammar, it's limited, but not bad, and that's in editing. There are rules in English and in every language that even native speakers make so called mistakes. Places, where your version of places of the grammar differs from the norm. And that is where you have to think about it conscious.
So those things can be taught, I only recommend doing it in Secondary School age and older. Let kids pick up a lot by reading first. And they can help a little bit, it doesn't help all of them and that's OK. As long as it's not the main thing. In classes, in foreign language we have two ways of dealing with grammar. And I am in favor of grammar in foreign language classes for older kids.
So, you can do it, do a little of it, it's not the cure for fossilization. The cure for fossilization is more comprehensible input. The fossilization debate says, it came from Canadian studies and it said "these concern, these classes for years and years and their French just stops in like 5th or 6th grade, they never improve: we

need grammar. First of all, it does continue, do improve. I've looked at the research, I looked at grade 7, 8, 9 there's progress".
If you want a good name to look at error-correction-research, I recommend the work of John Truscott.He lives in Taiwan, as a matter of fact. And he has been really writing brilliant papers. Really valuable writing for research on correction. There's nothing there, folks. It works, if you do it really, really hard on just a few things. Three months later it's just gone.

I: So, what do you recommend? How should we assess what children, what students have learned? Shall we use productive skills, causing them anxiety like we said before? Or what can we do about that?
S.K: Let me answer this. I'll bet you... That you're going to agree. If you take an experienced English teacher, English as a foreign language and you give the teacher a composition, written by a student, the teacher can look at it and in 10 seconds they can tell you all about the student. Sure?

I: Yes.
S.K: I have answered the question. In United States for example there is a huge assessment policy taking place, but all this assessment has just one purpose: to make money for big corporations. *Nada más.*
The data says that teachers in impressions of students are just as good and probably better. They have much better predictors at students' access and you know grades.
Teacher's impressions are by far or reliable, or valid. They take into account improvement, attitude... That's why they're good predictors of future success. So, this is the truth, I think. The teacher is much better than any standardized test.
Having said that, I think it's OK, an occasional big test kids take. We're talking about in general, you know, like the PISA kind of test. You know, those are good samples, students tested throughout the country every year, these were OK; I think we can keep them. And in terms of end of semester tests, people are concerned with reading because they don't trust the children to read. They want to make sure that they are countable. They want to make sure that the child really read the book.
The more you do that, the more you destroy the reading process. We have to, at some stage, trust students. And you know every study we have done- I mention it in my talks, it's in all my papers- every study we have, one group does stay in silent reading, reading for pleasure at school, the other does classic the readers always do better. We have the data; we don't have to reconfirm it. We've already done this in 50 different countries. It is our obligation to test the minimum.
I wrote a paper on this, it's somewhere on my website, called "NUT", no unnecessary testing. We want the minimum amount of testing that will do the job. Sure they need some. We're all in favor of assessment, all of us. We just are opposed to unnecessary and inappropriate assessment.

I: One last question Professor Krashen: what do you think of teachers' reputation in today's society? Here in Spain we perceive a certain discredit on our profession during the last years.
S.K: Teachers? We have to see the big picture attitude of teachers. Teachers are massively disrespected by society not only in your country, but worldwide. And this has been increasing over the last few decades. I think we have to see why.
There is a war against teachers and it is economically motivated. In the United States, for example, the budget for all public education is around 600 billion dollars. Most of it is teacher's salary and most of it is teacher benefits. Like retirement. The forces of evil want that money. And the way we're going to do it is to reduce teaching as a profession. Reduce the number of teachers and reduce the number of full time teachers. What they want are at

the most part time teachers who get less money and are paid by the job and will not get a retirement pay. In common terms of the job you have a few hours, that kind of things. And they want everyone to be this way. So the easiest way to get to it is by discrediting a whole profession and they are doing it, worldwide.

I: Professor Krashen, thank you very much for your time and this very interesting interview.
S.K: OK, thanks to you!

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