

An Interview with Stephen Krashen Institute of International Education

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Introduction

Dr. Krashen is professor emeritus at the University of Southern California and among the most prominent researchers in the field of language acquisition. For over 40 years, his writings have contributed significantly to the areas of language acquisition, bilingual education, and free voluntary reading. He is widely recognized for his theory of second language acquisition, which consists of five main hypotheses: the Acquisition-Learning hypothesis, the Monitor hypothesis, the Natural Order hypothesis, the Input hypothesis, the Affective Filter hypothesis, and most recently, the Conduit Hypothesis.

On December 7th, 2019, the Institute of International Education at Otemae University welcomed Dr. Stephen Krashen to speak at their international symposium titled “Multicultural Japan: Effective Methodologies for Teaching Language and Culture to Japanese University Students.” The conference was held to mark the culmination of a five-year research project that evaluated English language pedagogy and culturally familiar and non-familiar content used in tertiary education. During this time, Dr. Krashen agreed to an interview that touched on recognizing the place of both local and foreign cultures in the language classroom. The following is a dialogue with Gordon Carlson on behalf of the research team supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. GC stands for Gordon Carlson and SK for Stephen Krashen.

Interview

GC: Allow me to start with this. You say that “language acquisition proceeds best when the input is not just comprehensible, but really interesting, even compelling; so interesting that you forget you are listening to or reading another language.” Some research done by our colleagues (Sheridan, Tanaka & Hogg, 2019) supports the notion that cultural familiarity in teaching content raises interest. Would you agree? If so, how do you feel about mainstream materials that tend to carry mainly foreign-related themes in the content?

SK: I like to focus on universal aspects of life - universal problems. For the cultural part, I do understand the research where you change the names of cities and all that. This does have an effect, and I’m not surprised that it does. Overwhelming all that is dealing with the problems of life. It goes into two categories: ethics and metaphysics. Why are we here, and how are we supposed to behave? This is the basis of philosophy. It’s the basis of religion. It’s those two things. The Jewish religion says Judaism, similar to Islam too, and I’ve done a comparison study, relies on three pillars, which are also the pillars of literature and stories in general. How do you get contact with the other side? By prayer, meditation? And how do you help people? Those are the universals. What is life about?

How do you help people? And it drives everything. We deal with ethics and metaphysics all day long. Am I doing the right thing? Why am I here?

GC: Your affective filter hypothesis states that learners' ability to acquire language is constrained if they are experiencing negative emotions such as fear or embarrassment. At such times, the affective filter is said to be "up." Do you have any thoughts on how cultural unfamiliarity in textbooks, listening materials, and instruction can raise the affective filter?

SK: It makes things less comprehensible. That's part of it. The way to keep the filter low, the way to keep anxiety low, is to be faithful to the theory of acquisition. The interest has to be comprehensible, or you're anxious. The input has to be compelling, or you're bored, which leads to anxiety, of course. We hate boredom. There has to be enough of it so you can make progress. And if you make people talk too soon, it raises the filter - if you're not faithful to the theory. Now, the part of your research is fairly new to me - the idea of making small changes in the background of the story, and this is a challenge for me, and I haven't come to terms with it, does not make it more comprehensible. It makes it more *comfortable* in a way and makes it easier to relate to.

GC: You say that "language acquisition proceeds best when the acquirer is "open" to the input." Some research on listening comprehension suggests that there is an initial impediment to understanding when the content is loaded with culturally unfamiliar proper names or proper nouns. However, this barrier can be lowered after instruction in the target language. Would you agree that the active filter could be raised when listening materials are laden with culturally unfamiliar proper names and nouns?

SK: Yes, and here we are just talking as colleagues. I have no special knowledge of it. I would think when you're faced with something that's in a strange environment, you panic. There's a fear that you won't understand it, "Hey, I'm not going to get this." And then you find, "Oh, I know all about this stuff. It's the same as the work I go through in my life too." And you discover that it's a universal problem. We have a fear until we discover it, and when you change the name of the city, it's easier to find the universal theme, I think.

GC: I think you hit it on the nail.

SK: It's the fear that I won't understand.

GC: Let me switch gears a little. You favor the natural approach that also advocates extensive reading while not discriminating between inductive or deductive grammar teaching.

SK: It's both inductive and deductive. It's conscious learning.

GC: So, even your sharpest critics agree with you to some point, I'm sure.

SK: I don't know what they think! I don't know that they'll have to agree because some of them confuse inductive learning with acquisition. I don't know.

GC: However, few coursebook writers, or authors for language learning, assign a natural approach or even extensive reading as a proper role in textbook design, and it is largely left out of most curriculums. It seems that the majority of methodologists still design materials for reading, writing, listening, speaking, etcetera, aimed at introducing and fortifying grammar. What are your thoughts on it?

SK: There are two possibilities. One, they've never heard of it. Two, they disagree because they feel the powerful pull, or undertow toward conscious learning, which has become a default. You and I have the same problem. I *still* am tempted when there is a new word. I'm tempted to write it down and then review it later, even though I know it won't work. I'm better off listening to another story or keep going. When I'm reading a book in another language, and I come to a word that I don't know, and I figure out what it means or I look it up, I don't write it down, but I feel the temptation. It's the undertow. It's so ingrained in us. The unnatural way has become natural for us.

GC: That's interesting because my students sometimes highlight *all* the words that they don't know and look them up later. And I'm trying to teach them how to skip the non-essential things.

SK: Don't worry. It will come back. If it's important, it will come back. If it doesn't come back, who needs it? I no longer look up words unless I get curious. The linguist in me is just curious. But you want to find a book that's just so compelling; you don't want to look it up. You want to go to the next chapter. That's why I like Bernard Werber so much – he's a French author in science fiction - because I want to go to the next page. And the words I don't know never stop me. I don't have a problem with not understanding; it's just a little extra description. You can tolerate a little bit of noise in the data.

The best stories happen to be in Spanish. I read a book that was way over my head. There's an author named Isabel Allende who is from South America and lives in California. A brilliant writer. And all I had behind me was having read maybe 40 or 50 graded readers. That's all. I've never lived in a Spanish-speaking country. I picked up her book, *Zoro*. It's the prequel of the Zoro legend - how he went to Barcelona, became a swordsman, all this stuff. And it was so good. She wastes nothing. She's a real writer. She drags you in right away, and you want to know what's going to happen next. Every description is interesting. If there is a rifle on the wall, someone uses it. Nothing is wasted. I didn't look up anything, and the book was much too hard for me. I had a great time. I loved it, and I got a lot of vocabulary from it without realizing. That's what we're looking for. Then, if your students find something like that, they won't want to highlight. They won't want to make a list. Cleaning up the house, I

found my old French books from college. And in the back of the readers was a list of vocabulary. My French now is pretty good, but I still don't know those words. It would be half of them. It's a waste of time. With compelling text, you don't do it.

GC: So, the challenge for us as teachers is to find materials that are compelling for students, and it's very hard to find that in mainstream textbooks.

SK: Of course. They haven't caught on.

GC: Do you think that we need to localize things a little bit more to spark their interest?

SK: I hadn't thought about this until I read your papers (Carlson, 2019; Sheridan, Tanaka & Hogg, 2019), and I thought that there is something going on there. Again, it overcomes the initial fear that I won't understand this. It's easier to discover the plot, so I think you might have something. It might be a way of just calming people down.

GC: You often contend that learners should focus on meaning rather than the rules of language. However, most tests and evaluations try to gauge students' understanding of language rules and vocabulary. Sometimes, tests evaluate how much output, as in speaking, is achieved, and that often forces students to speak when they are not ready. So, what are some good ways to evaluate students' progress? And should the rules of language be included in evaluations and assessments?

SK: First, when you're tested on grammar and tested on output, how do you prepare? The best predictor on nearly all tests, unless totally linguistic, is going to be reading. It's the *best* predictor of everything. I did a paper with Kyung Sook Cho (Cho & Krashen, 2019), and we did reading correlations - reading correlating with everything - reading, listening, writing, and speaking. By far, it was the best predictor of everything. So, if you want to do well on those tests, read a lot. When you get more comprehensible input, your output will get better; it will become more accurate.

GC: So, as teachers, how should we evaluate students? We sometimes get tests handed to us that test grammar.

SK: In a sense, it doesn't matter because if your kids are reading a lot, they will do fine. They can't help it.

GC: We read about your support for comprehensible sheltered subject matter for second language students, which is a form of "content-based" teaching. In recent years, we have slowly added to the number of content-based classes that are offered at our university. Now that this trend has gained more traction throughout this region of the world, what are your thoughts on the successes or failures of content or content-based teaching?

SK: I don't know anymore. I invented it, and now I don't know. And I'm wondering if reading fiction is so powerful that we don't need to worry about it. Try this. So much of our knowledge comes from reading fiction. Say you have a student here in Japan who wants to have a specialty in English like law, philosophy, music. Do we give them a content course in English or just say, "Read what you like?" If we say, "Just do free reading," they'll probably get it anyway. And a lot of it they'll get in their first language. Or let's take science. Someone wants to be a scientist. What you really want is a good knowledge in Japanese of chemistry and physics. That's really what you want. And then read lots of science fiction in English, you'll have it. When I give a discussion in French, say on linguistics, I haven't read a lot on linguistics in French, but I've read a lot of French novels. I'm thinking fiction might make a lot of content teaching unnecessary in other languages because you're getting a lot of it in the first language and reading fiction might, I'm not sure, it's an interesting hypothesis, might bring you all the way. I don't know.

GC: Not everyone is interested in reading.

SK: They just haven't found what is *interesting* yet. You become a reader when you have a burning interest in something that you want to know more about. There is a very interesting study by a woman named Rosalie Fink (1998), a professor in New York. This is first-language study, but I think we can learn something from it. She looked at grownups who had been successful. One was a Nobel Prize winner. Three out of the group of 12 had published things. All were considered dyslexic when they were in school. They didn't start to read until way late - high school, and one grade 12 who couldn't read anything. Totally dyslexic. The breaking point was when they developed a burning interest in something and wanted to know more. Then it exploded nearly instantly. Within months, they were reading complicated stuff. Everyone is a potential reader.

GC: Students' perception of the world is ever-changing and evolving. How do you feel about the way that education is changing, and have you adapted your way of thinking or teaching to the way that education is changing?

SK: I don't think so. There's nothing there that is new and interesting. There's nothing happening. The technological breakthroughs - some of them have been interesting, but I'll quote for you what my colleague [Beniko Mason] said in a talk this morning with others. "Technology now makes it possible to do things in nanoseconds that we should never have done in the first place" (B. Mason, personal communication, December 7, 2019). Just because it's new, high tech doesn't mean it's helpful. Technology should not replicate what humans can already do and do very well. It should do things that we haven't been able to do, and *those* aspects of technology have been *fabulous* - the cellphone. GPS. Oh, my God, it's wonderful. I can't go to the bathroom in the middle of the night without my GPS. I'd never find it! So yes, some things have been absolutely wonderful for quality of life etcetera, but in education, not much. The profit motive, I think, has gotten in the way. I think it was Frank Smith

who said that the computer is one of the best things that has happened to the human race; it's one of the *worst* things that has happened to schools. That's my conclusion. It's made it easier to do the wrong thing, which is conscious learning. And there's been no serious effort outside of Kindles and things like that to help reading, writing, thinking, problem-solving etcetera.

GC: So, if you had, say, an electronic version of word cards as opposed to...

SK: Exactly. That's the idea. Still wrong. And anything that will make money gets on the market right away.

GC: That would make an interesting discussion. Some educators go on about how wonderful AI is, and how it will improve language learning.

SK: I've looked into them, and none have shown to be any good that I can see. I've looked at the research. There's no impact except for small things like ebooks, CDs are okay. Minor things have been helpful. No question. But it's made it too easy to do it wrong, and we have no standards, no criticism of it. We just accept it because it's new and cool. Rosetta Stone. (sigh) When I wrote reviews of Rosetta Stone, they slammed it. Didn't matter. On it goes. And then the commercials make it sound like it's my work because they say, "We're going to do this the natural way" and then have the most boring input that anyone could ever imagine.

GC: I can't argue with that! Thank you for giving us your perspectives and for such an enjoyable conversation. We hope to have you back here again.

SK: My pleasure. We'll see you again.

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