

One on One

Interview with Professor Stephen Krashen



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At a recent conference on English Language Teaching (ELT), when I asked the participants to name the person who has been the most influential voice in the area of second language acquisition, as a chorus most participants pronounced the name “Krashen”. Yes, search the name “Krashen” on Google and you will get over 1,71,000 results. Stephen Krashen, Emeritus Professor at the University of Southern California, is one of the most cited linguists in the world. Known as a linguist, education researcher and activist Professor Krashen has had a tremendous impact on second/foreign language teaching researchers. **Dr Albert P'Rayan** interviewed him for The Hindu and here is an extract of the interview:

You have been the most influential voice in the field of second language acquisition for almost four decades. Are your famous five hypotheses still influential and popular?

SK: I have no idea how popular they are, but I have noticed that they still get cited. And, to my surprise, they have withstood the test of time – all published evidence remains consistent with the hypotheses.

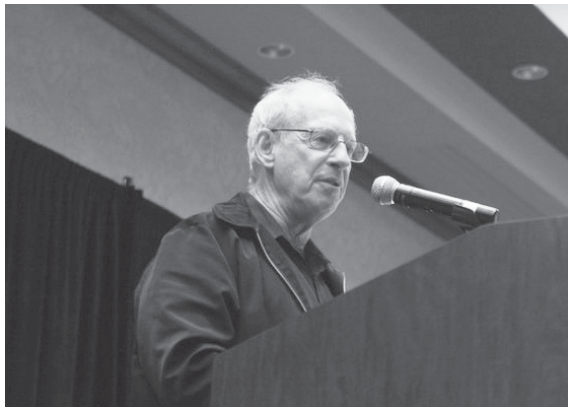
Researchers have questioned your Monitor Model with the criticism that the

Model is less testable, viable and useable. It is also said that you have revised your Monitor Model and how learners acquire a second language many times since 1977. What is your position now?

SK: My position is the same now as it was 40 years ago: The hypotheses make predictions and so far these predictions have been confirmed. The revisions I have made are not fundamental changes but expansions: The hypotheses were originally intended to explain phenomena in adult second language acquisition, but we have found that they help explain what is going on in child second language, first language, literacy development (eg Krashen 2004), and to some extent even animal language (Krashen, 2013).

In the context of L2 learning, most learners cannot acquire the language but can only learn the language. What is the effective way of teaching L2 to the disadvantaged?

SK: This is like asking “if someone is dying of thirst and there is nothing to drink, what can be done?” If the theory is right, comprehensible input is the only path, the essential environmental ingredient. Our job is to provide this input, aural and written. There are many possibilities that have not been fully explored. We should explore them



rather than trying to find new ways of teaching grammar.

Is it possible for an adult learner (18+) to acquire a second or foreign language to achieve native-like proficiency?

SK: I don't know, but what is obvious is that a lot of adults come quite close. This is a remarkable achievement. (There may be more successful cases among us than we realize. Because they are native-like, we don't discover that they have acquired the language as adults.)

In your recent letter to *Los Angeles Times* (Sept 7, 2016) you state 'Bilingual programs do not prevent the acquisition of English – they facilitate it.' Can you please explain it?

SK: First let's define bilingual education: It is a method of using the first language in a way that accelerates acquisition of a second language. There are three crucial characteristics of effective bilingual education programs: (1) They provide subject matter teaching in the first language to give students background knowledge. This makes subject matter teaching in the second language more comprehensible. (2) Because it is easier to develop literacy in a language that the child already understands, effective programs develop literacy in the child's first

language. Literacy in the home language accelerates literacy development in the second language, even when the writing systems are different. (3) They provide comprehensible input in the second language. Programs that have these characteristics teach the second language faster than "immersion" programs. (Crawford and Krashen, 2015).

In the most recent analysis, Professors Grace McField (Cal State San Marcos) and David McField (MiraCosta College) examined 89 studies comparing bilingual education and English immersion. They concluded that when the programs and research design are set up correctly, those in bilingual education did better on tests of English reading, and the superiority of bilingual education was considerably larger than previously reported (McField and McField, 2014).

In an article titled "Krashen Burn", Jill Stewart criticized your model of bilingual education by stating that you take side with the "multi-million-dollar bilingual education industry." Are your views on bilingualism accepted in the US now? Is your stand on bilingualism the same?

SK: There is no "multi-million dollar bilingual education industry." But I certainly took sides with supporters of bilingual education because both research and theory are on their side. And they still are. We will know more about current public opinion on bilingual education soon: Californians will be voting on a measure that would restore bilingual education in our state. ***

You have been promoting free voluntary reading. How important is free voluntary reading in the 21st century dominated by the digital media?

SK: Free voluntary reading is free voluntary reading, whether done on paper or on a computer screen. For example, there is data suggesting that second language acquirers improve by doing “free voluntary surfing” (Wang and Lee, 2015).

How important is motivation for success in second language acquisition?

SK: I think the main thing is getting truly interesting or “compelling” comprehensible input, so interesting that you even forget it is in another language. Language acquisition then occurs as a by-product, involuntarily. If this is true, you don’t need to be “motivated” to acquire the language. It will happen whether you want it to happen or not (Krashen, 2011).

Some linguists and ELT experts are of the view that explicit grammar teaching is essential in the second language context. What is your reaction to the statement?

SK: My conclusion is that grammar instruction is not evil, but it is limited. Grammar rules are hard to learn, hard to retrieve and apply, and hard to remember. I presented the arguments in Krashen, (1981, 1982) and reviewed more evidence in Krashen, (2003).

“Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill.” Does this statement of yours imply that grammar teaching is a waste of time?

SK: There are a few uses for conscious knowledge of grammar but learning grammar rules is definitely peripheral in the language teaching program:(1) It can be used as Monitor, to edit and correct our output, but in order to do this, stringent conditions must be met: you have to know



the rule, be thinking about form, and have time to retrieve and apply the rule. These conditions are rarely met in real language use. (2) It can provide an introduction to linguistics, or “language appreciation.” (3) It has been argued that consciously learned rules can help comprehension. This is plausible.

Many learners who learn English as a second or foreign language go through a “silent period” and do not develop their communication skills even after having learnt English for many years. This is the plight of many learners in India and other countries too. What could be the possible reasons for their lack of proficiency in the language?

SK: The silent period is quite common and could last for a long time. The longest case I know of lasted 32 years, because the person had no way of producing language (Richard Boydell, see Krashen, 2014). There are several other reasons it could last a long time: The most obvious is that the acquirer has not acquired enough language. Testing comprehension is an easy way to find out. There can also be psychological factors: most common, I suspect, is reluctance to run the risk of committing errors because of experiences of excessive correction and even

ridicule, unfortunately common in younger children of immigrant families with functional but imperfect ability to speak the heritage language. This produces “language shyness” (Krashen, 1998), and in severe cases it could result in a very long silent period.

What is clear that the “cure” for a long silent period is not forcing the person to speak: The cure may be more language acquisition via highly interesting comprehensible input, or it may be removing the expectation for perfect output.

What is the right way to learn a foreign language in general and EFL in particular?

SK: Here are some suggestions, all based on the “Comprehension Hypothesis.”

(1) Beginners: Find a good class taught with a comprehension-based method, such as Natural Approach or TPRS. Comprehension-based methods have never lost in method comparison studies (Krashen, 2014). I am very impressed with TPRS, and I’m taking a (virtual) TPRS Mandarin class now.

Start reading very easy texts that are interesting to you.

Keep taking classes until you are an intermediate, which means you can communicate with native speakers on at least some topics and read some authentic light books.

2) Once you have reached the intermediate stage, continue self-selected pleasure reading. Find texts that are genuinely “compelling.” For English, check out ESLpod.org. Watch TV and movies but only if you are really interested in the

film or the program.

Find a “language parent,” a term invented by Lonsdale (2007), a proficient speaker of the language who will provide you with comprehensible input, help you understand what they are saying, but won’t try to “teach” you.

(3) To reach advanced or specialty levels, the real path is doing a great deal of reading in an area you are interested in. Read texts that help you solve problems you are working on now, that deal with issues that are on your mind. (Krashen, 2012).

Your work has been recognized widely and you have won numerous awards. Which award is the most important one to you? Why?

SK; One of the most satisfying signs of recognition is being invited to be interviewed. So thank you for this invitation.

American linguist Noam Chomsky and you are known as activists. Do you think it is important for academics to play the role of activists too? How important is Intellectual courage for academics?

SK: Yes, I think academics have a responsibility to share their knowledge with the public. It takes tremendous academic courage and energy for young people to be activists, because of their work and family responsibilities, and the fear of losing their positions. For older people who are retired and can’t be fired, it takes no courage, and we have plenty of time.

My last question. Do you wish to be known as a linguist or as an activist?

SK: I would like the ideas I have worked with to be known, both among academics and the public, so the answer is both.