

Gain without Pain: Increasing Learner Motivation through Comprehensible Input

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The beginning of the spring vacation has arrived and I have just completed inputting the course syllabi for the next academic year. This is one of the tasks I do in my work as a tertiary-level EFL instructor, but one I do not particularly enjoy. Having not yet met the students who will be taking my classes, I know nothing about their interests, needs or abilities, but I must prescribe and describe in specific detail what these students are to learn, week by week, whether they like it or not. My command of the English language gives me an air of authority: 'Students are expected to attend at least 80 percent of classes...', 'Homework will be assigned every week...', 'Due dates must be strictly observed...', 'Work at home will be required in addition to class work...' If they actually bother to read the course syllabus, this will be the students' first encounter with me. What kind of impression will they get?

Most college students in Japan have had their first taste of English education at junior high school. They probably spent most of their time speeding through a textbook, focusing entirely on grammar and vocabulary - reading grammatical formulas and switching in appropriate vocabulary. English teaching in Japan is geared towards passing various examinations. Our language is broken down into mere formulas with complex rules to be memorized. Unfortunately, by the time these students come to university, many of them have become unmotivated, indifferent, inattentive or simply fed up. Is it too late to arouse them from this state of inertia and disinterest? Could they possibly become motivated, stimulated or even excited about English classes? Perhaps they can, but I would probably have to reconsider the wording of my syllabus: 'Students will be expected to enjoy themselves in at least 95 percent of all classes...', 'It is a requirement for all students to have fun in class...', and 'Students will engage in amusing and exhilarating activities throughout the course and become fluent speakers of English effortlessly!' This would surely be a hard promise for me to keep, but it may be something worth striving for.

"We must...realize that it is our professional responsibility to teach according to our convictions about how people acquire language" (Krashen, 2004a, para. 20).

It is now commonly believed that a foreign language can be acquired faster and more effectively when the learning experience is an enjoyable one. Linguist and educational researcher Krashen (2004a) insists that when it comes to language education, "the path of

pleasure is the only path” (para. 3). Krashen is credited with introducing several influential concepts to the study of second language acquisition, one of them being the Input Hypothesis, more recently known as the Comprehension Hypothesis. Krashen claims that language is naturally acquired (as opposed to ‘learned’) when students understand messages. He also claims that “language acquisition is effortless ... it involves no energy, no work” (Krashen, 2003, p. 4). These may seem like outrageous statements to hard-working language teachers, but there are more surprises in store. According to Krashen (2003), the only thing a teacher needs to do is “give students comprehensible messages that they will pay attention to” (p. 4). If the messages are comprehensible and there are enough of them, grammar is acquired subconsciously in a predictable order (the Natural Order Hypothesis), and fluency will develop without conscious effort by the learner and without the need for explicit teaching. Many, however, have argued that comprehensible input is not enough, and those who believe that ‘conscious learning’ and ‘deliberate teaching’ are necessary have regarded Krashen’s views as ‘deeply anti-pedagogical’ (Marton, 1990). Radical ideas that upset the status quo always receive much opposition.

Krashen has been challenging the established practices of foreign language education for the past thirty years, but he was not the first to promote the idea that formal instruction does not aid second language acquisition. Social critic Ivan Illich expressed radical views in his 1973 book, *Deschooling Society*. Illich (1973) writes “Most people who learn a second language well do so as a result of odd circumstances and not of sequential teaching. They go to live with their grandparents, they travel, or they fall in love with a foreigner” (p. 18) With regard to school, Illich’s views are rather grim; “schools are the wrong places for learning a skill; they are even worse places for getting an education” (p. 24). Krashen does not go so far. Although he rejects language instruction per se, Krashen proposes a new and challenging role for foreign language teachers; that of provider of comprehensible input in anxiety-free situations.

Along with comprehensible input, students need to have motivation, self-confidence and low anxiety for second language acquisition to take place. Krashen (1992) proposes that fear and anxiety can prevent input from reaching what Chomsky has called the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition. Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that language acquisition is impeded by negative emotional responses which subconsciously block the learning centers in our brain. This hypothesis is supported by the latest research in how the brain learns. In a lecture on the functioning of the brain as a learning machine, prominent German neurologist Prof. Dr. Manfred Spitzer reminds us that learning takes place inside the brain and not necessarily inside a school. According to Spitzer (2002), some important factors that influence learning are attention, emotion and motivation. Speaking about the effects of emotions on learning, Spitzer tells us that ‘Fear and Learning go together like Sauerkraut and Custard,’ and that Fear (Angst) is the opposite of

Creativity (2008a). When someone engaged in a learning process has a positive experience, the brain releases endorphins which are morphine-like substances that will further increase the person's feeling of well-being. Furthermore, Spitzer tells us that when information enters the brain, the number of neuron connections produced by the brain depends on the person's mood. The better the mood, the more connections are activated, allowing the brain to take in and store the information more effectively as well as enabling easier access to it later on (2008b). Here, at last, is scientific proof for Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis from the field of medical science!

Another of Krashen's much debated claims is the idea that second language acquisition does not occur through speaking practice, but is entirely a result of listening and reading. In this day of Communicative Language Teaching, many teachers value speaking activities and devote much class time to student output. In Krashen's view, activities that focus mainly on output do not contribute to second language acquisition (Burden, 2006). Krashen (2004a) insists that teachers should concentrate on providing students with "massive amounts of comprehensible input in class" as well as "provide the means for them to obtain comprehensible input outside of class" (p. 6). The crucial point, however, is that the input must be of a very specific level; a level slightly ahead of that possessed by the student. If it is at the same level, there will be nothing new to acquire from it and if it is too difficult, the input will be incomprehensible and of no value. Krashen calls this concept 'i+1', with 'i' being the current level of proficiency and '+1' being a slightly higher level (Burden, 2006). But Krashen does not give us an exact mathematical formula that lets us arrive at the algebraic equation of 'language acquisition = i+1'. He does not tell us how to establish our students' 'i' level. Nor does he tell us where to find massive amounts of '+1' material. He tells us the material must be interesting enough for the students to want to pay attention to it, but how can we know whether the material we have selected, often months in advance, is going to be interesting to our learners? Is Krashen setting unattainable expectations of teachers?

Applying Krashen's theory to foreign language teaching requires us to discard some of our old beliefs about the essential qualities of a 'good' teacher. Krashen does not demand that teachers possess great knowledge of target structures and grammatical rules. To him, knowledge of grammar is not as important as the ability to provide plenty of comprehensible input in a low-anxiety situation. What I think Krashen asks of teachers is to actively apply their intuition and creative imagination. If he is right, our students should be able to increase fluency along a path of painless gain. The challenge for us is to expose them to vast amounts of stimulating and digestible material in a low-stress environment. Krashen recommends books, magazines, comics, and Internet surfing for comprehensible reading material. Students should have as much free choice as possible when deciding what to read. Comprehensible listening activities may be a little harder to find. Films and TV shows are two recommendations Krashen

makes for providing listening input, as long as they are interesting to the students. Teachers are required to use their skills and imagination to make such material comprehensible, not overwhelming, to learners of various levels.

Most recently, Stephen Krashen promotes the use of Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), which he believes to be the most powerful tool in language education (Krashen, 2004b). This is something teachers could certainly encourage their students to do at home or during class time. Students will need guidance locating material suitable to their needs. In addition to a large amount of input through reading, more class time could be spent providing plenty of comprehensible listening input. Since students spend very limited time in class, they should also be encouraged to watch films or TV shows in their free time. Rather than being the central authority in the classroom, teachers could take on the role of facilitator, creating input that is stimulating, interesting and motivating to the learner. Enjoyable and stress-free EFL classes might be the key to unlocking our students' learning potential.

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