

The 40 Years' War

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For the last 40-plus years, we have been engaged in a war between two hypotheses, two views on how we acquire language and develop literacy. It is a good war, because no matter which side eventually wins, we will be learning a great deal.

The Comprehension Hypothesis states that we acquire language and develop literacy when we understand messages, that is, when we understand what we hear and what we read, when we receive "comprehensible input." Language acquisition is a subconscious process; while it is happening we are not aware that it is happening, and the competence developed this way is stored in the brain subconsciously.

The rival to the Comprehension Hypothesis is the Skill-Building Hypothesis. The Skill-Building Hypothesis says that to acquire language, we first memorize vocabulary and learn grammar rules consciously and then practice them in output until they become "automatic": In other words, consciously learned knowledge eventually becomes subconsciously "acquired" knowledge. Skill-Building also holds that we can adjust our consciously learned rules when we are corrected.

Note that the cause and effect relationship in the two points of view is different, an observation first made by Frank Smith in relationship to reading theory. The Comprehension Hypothesis states that language acquisition and literacy development is the RESULT of getting comprehensible input by e.g. hearing stories (Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, and Krashen, 2009) and reading interesting books and other print (Lee, 2007; Mason and Krashen, 2017; Cho, 2017). In other words, comprehensible input is the CAUSE of language acquisition. In contrast, the Skill-Building Hypothesis claims that conscious learning, correction, and output practice are the cause of language acquisition. We study vocabulary and learn grammar rules and then practice our consciously learned knowledge in output, in speaking and writing, and improve our conscious knowledge by getting corrected. The result, it is claimed, is the ability to use the language.

I have argued that the published research strongly supports the Comprehension Hypothesis. This evidence comes from studies comparing comprehension-based methods with methods based on Skill-Building, as well as correlational studies, often multivariate, and case histories. The evidence also includes research showing the inefficacy of output, grammar study, and error correction (Krashen, 1994a; 2003; Lee, 2005; Truscott, 2016).

Not only are comprehension-based methods more effective, they are also more pleasant (McQuillan, 1994; Krashen, 1994b; Lao and Krashen, 2008). Comprehensible input provides immediate pleasure in the form of interesting (and often compelling) messages. It provides immediate gratification. Skill-building offers only delayed gratification, and great deal of hard work until that gratification is supposed to arrive.

But true gratification never arrives: I have yet to see a single documented case of someone who has acquired a language well through skill-building only (see e.g. the case of Gouin, described in Krashen, 2014). In all cases of claimed success from skill-building only, a closer look reveals that the acquirer received a great deal of comprehensible input (e.g. Krashen, 1991). But there are many cases of acquirers who have done well with mostly, and sometimes only, comprehensible input (Krashen, 2014; 2017).

The Comprehension Hypothesis is thus more successful, and it provides a pleasant path to language acquisition. Skill-building has not done well in the research, and is often painful. Yet the Skill-Building Hypothesis for most people is not a hypothesis: It is an axiom. In fact, I suspect that most people are unaware that the Comprehension Hypothesis exists. My goal is to at least reduce the status of the Skill-Building hypothesis from Axiom to Hypothesis.

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