Stephen Krashen

Access to Books and Time to Read versus the Common Core State Standards and Tests

The author argues that access to books and time to read play a vital role in literacy development and explains why standardized tests are detrimental to students' literacy development.

This issue of *English Journal* is dedicated to "encouraging the voices of diverse populations and using reading and writing to help students find their voices as members of a democratic society." This cannot happen if students do not have access to books and time to read.

In this article, I attempt to explain why access and time to read are so crucial, show that significant numbers of students have little access to reading material, and argue that recent changes in language arts education are working against access to books and reading time in school and outside of school, and therefore are working against the development of literacy.

The Importance of Access

The following presents a simple hypothesis about the development of literacy:

> *Access to books → Free voluntary reading → Literacy development*

Access Leads to Free Voluntary Reading

Contrary to popular opinion, there is good evidence that given access to comprehensible, interesting texts, young people will read them. Furthermore, there is evidence that young people like to read as much as they ever have (Krashen, "Do Teenagers," *Power,* "Why We Should"). In addition, nearly all students in sustained silent reading classes become engaged in reading when interesting books are provided in a relaxed environment with little or no evaluation (Krashen, "Non-engagement"). Also, the decline in the "reading romance" as children get older has been exaggerated (Krashen and Von Sprecken).

There is no question that activities such as read-alouds and discussion of good books can lead to more reading (Brassell; Trelease; Wang and Lee), that reading itself leads to more reading (Greaney and Clarke; Pilgreen and Krashen), and that suggestions from librarians, teachers, and others can be helpful (Carlsen and Sherrill); but the necessary condition for encouraging reading is access to reading material.

Free Voluntary Reading → Literacy Development

There is overwhelming evidence that those who read more read better, write with a more acceptable writing style, have larger vocabularies, have better control of complex grammatical constructions, and spell better than those who read less. In addition, those who read more know more about a wide variety of subjects, including literature, history, and science, and have more "practical knowledge" (e.g., the work of Stanovich and others, reviewed in Krashen, *Power*).

Evidence for the relationship between free reading and literacy development comes from several sources:

1. Studies of sustained silent reading (SSR): Students in language (first or second) classes that include time set aside for self-selected reading consistently outperform those in

similar classes that do not include self-selected reading time on tests of reading, writing, spelling, vocabulary, and grammar (reviewed in Krashen, *Power*).

2. Case histories: Those who grew up in poverty but nevertheless had access to books give wide self-selected reading the credit for their school success and acquisition of advanced levels of literacy competence (e.g., Geoffrey Canada, Elizabeth Murray, Richard Wright; in Krashen, *Power,* "Why We Should").
3. Correlational studies: The amount of free reading reported is a consistent predictor of scores on tests of reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling (Krashen, *Power;* Lee).

Libraries

A number of studies confirm that providing access to books via libraries has a positive impact on reading development, confirming the relationship between the first and third elements in the literacy hypothesis above (e.g., Krashen, "Protecting"; Lance): The better the library (more books, presence of a credentialed librarian, better staffing), the higher the reading scores.

Not Direct Instruction

In addition to studies showing the superiority of reading over traditional approaches that focus on direct instruction, there is additional evidence that strongly suggests that direct instruction does not result in significant literacy competence.

Complexity and Size

The systems to be mastered via direct instruction (phonics, grammar, vocabulary, spelling) are too large and complex to be consciously learned (Krashen, *Power;* Smith, *Understanding*).

As an example, consider the case of vocabulary: There are simply too many words to teach and learn one at a time. Estimates of adult vocabulary size range from about 40,000 (Lorge and Chall) to 156,000 words (Seashore and Eckerson), and it has been claimed that elementary school children acquire from eight (Nagy and Herman) to more than 14 (Miller) words per day. After studying the range of vocabulary appearing in printed school English, William Nagy and Richard Anderson conclude that "our findings indicate that even the most ruthlessly systematic direct vocabulary instruction could neither account for a significant proportion of all the words the children actually learn, nor cover more than a modest proportion of the words they will encounter in school reading materials" (304).

Not only are there many words to acquire, there are also subtle and complex properties of words that competent users have acquired. Quite often, the meaning of a word is not nearly adequately represented by a synonym. As Edward Finegan points out, words that appear to have the same meaning refer to slightly different concepts or are used in slightly different ways (e.g., the difference between "vagrant" and "homeless").

Also, when we acquire a word, we acquire considerable knowledge about its grammatical properties. English speakers, for example, can freely add "un" to many adjectives, producing "unhappy" from "happy," but cannot do the same with "sad." Professional grammarians have struggled to properly describe the generalizations underlying such phenomena, and they are rarely taught.

Similar arguments have been presented for phonics (Smith, *Understanding*), spelling (Smith, *Writing*), and grammar (Krashen, *Explorations*).

To make the expectation of direct literacy instruction even more hopeless, experts now demand that students study and learn the subtleties of different genres (text structure), especially the structure of academic prose. Scholars have only recently started to describe this genre in detail, and their descriptions are not only complex, but revisions are made in every new professional paper on this topic (see, e.g., Hyland; Swales).

Not Output

It has also been asserted that we can develop literacy through output, that is, through writing. Frank Smith has cast doubt on this claim: "I thought the answer [to how we learn to write] must be that we learn to write by writing until I reflected on how little anyone writes in school, even the eager students, and how little feedback is provided . . . . No one writes enough to learn more than a small part of what writers need to know" (Smith, *Joining* 19).

Research has confirmed that Smith is right: We do not produce anywhere near enough writing for it to affect literacy competence, nor are we corrected nearly enough. In addition, increasing the amount of writing students do does not increase writing competence, but increasing reading does (Krashen, "Input").

This is not to diminish the importance of writing. While writing style (mastery of the special language of writing, e.g., vocabulary, grammar, text structure) comes from reading, not actual writing, the act of writing (and rewriting) makes a powerful contribution to problem-solving and cognitive development (e.g., Boice; Elbow).

A Two-Stage Process

My conjecture is that the mastery of academic language develops in two stages. The first consists of massive self-selected reading, largely fiction, that supplies the linguistic competence and knowledge that makes reading actual academic texts more comprehensible. The second stage consists of reading academic texts that the reader is genuinely interested in, texts that contain information that the reader needs to solve a problem that is of great personal interest.

In both cases, the reading is "narrow": Readers focus on a few authors, genres, or topics at a time, and gradually move on to others. In academic reading, narrow reading means selective reading, reading texts that relate to the topic we are interested in now, a question we are asking now, a problem we are trying to solve now.

In neither stage are readers deliberately trying to acquire the special language of academic prose; they are reading for meaning. The acquisition of academic prose occurs as a by-product.

The Major Problem: Lack of Access to Books

Children who live in conditions of poverty have limited access to books. They have few books at home, in their classroom libraries, school libraries, and public libraries, and have few bookstores in their neighborhoods (Krashen, *Power*). If free voluntary reading has such a powerful effect on literacy development, if it is, as I suspect, the only way to develop academic literacy, it makes sense that children of poverty score poorly on tests of reading, vocabulary, and other aspects of literacy. This problem must be solved.

The obvious solution is to improve libraries in areas where there are high concentrations of children of poverty: for these children, school and public libraries may be their only source of reading material.

Libraries and Poverty: The PIRLS Study

A number of recent studies have come to a startling and hopeful conclusion: Libraries can make up for the effects of poverty on literacy development.

The PIRLS organization (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) administers a reading test to fourth graders in many countries every few years. Students are tested in the language of the country, and tests given in different languages in different countries are of equal difficulty. We analyzed the 2006 results for 40 countries, each testing about 4,000 students, examining the impact of factors considered to be related to reading achievement. Table 1, from Stephen Krashen, Syying Lee, and Jeff McQuillan, presents the results.

If free voluntary reading has such a powerful effect on literacy development, it makes sense that children of poverty score poorly on tests of reading, vocabulary, and other aspects of literacy. This problem must be solved.

We used a multiple regression analysis, which allowed us to determine the impact of each predictor uninfluenced by the other predictors.

According to Table 1, the strongest predictor of reading achievement among ten-year-olds is socioeconomic status (SES), defined here as a combination

TABLE 1. Multiple Regression Analysis: Predictors of Achievement on the PIRLS Reading Test

Predictor	Beta	P
Socioeconomic status	0.42	0.003
Independent reading time	0.19	0.09
School library (at least 500 books)	0.34	0.005
Instructional time	–0.19	0.07

$r^2 = .63$

of education, life expectancy, and wealth in each country (beta = .42). In agreement with many other studies, we found that higher SES meant better performance.

"Independent reading time" stands for the percentage of students in each country who participated in self-selected reading programs in school: more students doing independent reading was associated with higher scores on the PIRLS. This result fell just short of the usual standard for statistical significance, but it is consistent with the results of in-school self-selected reading programs, as discussed earlier.

School library in Table 1 means the percentage of children in each country with access to a school library containing more than 500 books. This was a strong predictor of reading achievement. Of great importance is that this predictor was nearly as strong as the effect of socio-economic status on reading achievement.

The final predictor, instructional time, means the average hours per week devoted to reading instruction in each country. According to our analysis, the effect of instruction was modest and negative, that is, more instruction tended to be related to lower performance on the reading test. This predictor fell just short of statistical significance. It may be the case that a little direct reading instruction is beneficial, but after a point it is ineffective and counterproductive.

Our results are quite similar to those reported elsewhere: other studies have shown that access to books has a strong effect on reading-test scores as well as other measures, and the positive effect of access to books is as strong as the negative effect of poverty (Achterman and Martin; Evans, Kelley, Sikora, and Treiman; Schubert and Becker). This makes sense: good libraries supply the reading material that children of poverty lack.

How the Common Core Standards Work against the Development of Literacy

Some Background

The move to Common Core Standards, and their inevitable companion, national tests, was based on a false premise: Our schools are "broken." The "broken schools" assumption was based on the claim that US students do poorly on international tests when compared to other countries, and that the only way to improve schools is to force students and teachers to do better by rigidly controlling what is taught (standards) and making sure that it is taught (national tests). But the Common Core is a bad solution to a nonexistent problem.

There is no evidence that national standards and increased testing have improved student learning in the past (Nichols, Glass, and Berliner; Tienken). Also, analyses of our international test scores have revealed that (1) US international test scores are nowhere near as bad as critics claim they are and have not declined (Loveless), and (2) the role of poverty is extremely important: middle-class American students who attend well-funded schools score at or near the top of the world on international tests (Bracey; Payne and Biddle). Our overall scores are less than spectacular because of our high rate (more than 23%) of child poverty, the highest among all industrialized countries (Adamson). In comparison, high-scoring Finland has less than 4% poverty. About half of the gap between US scores on the 2009 PISA and those of the highest-scoring OECD nations is closed if the effect of poverty is considered (Carnoy and Rothstein).

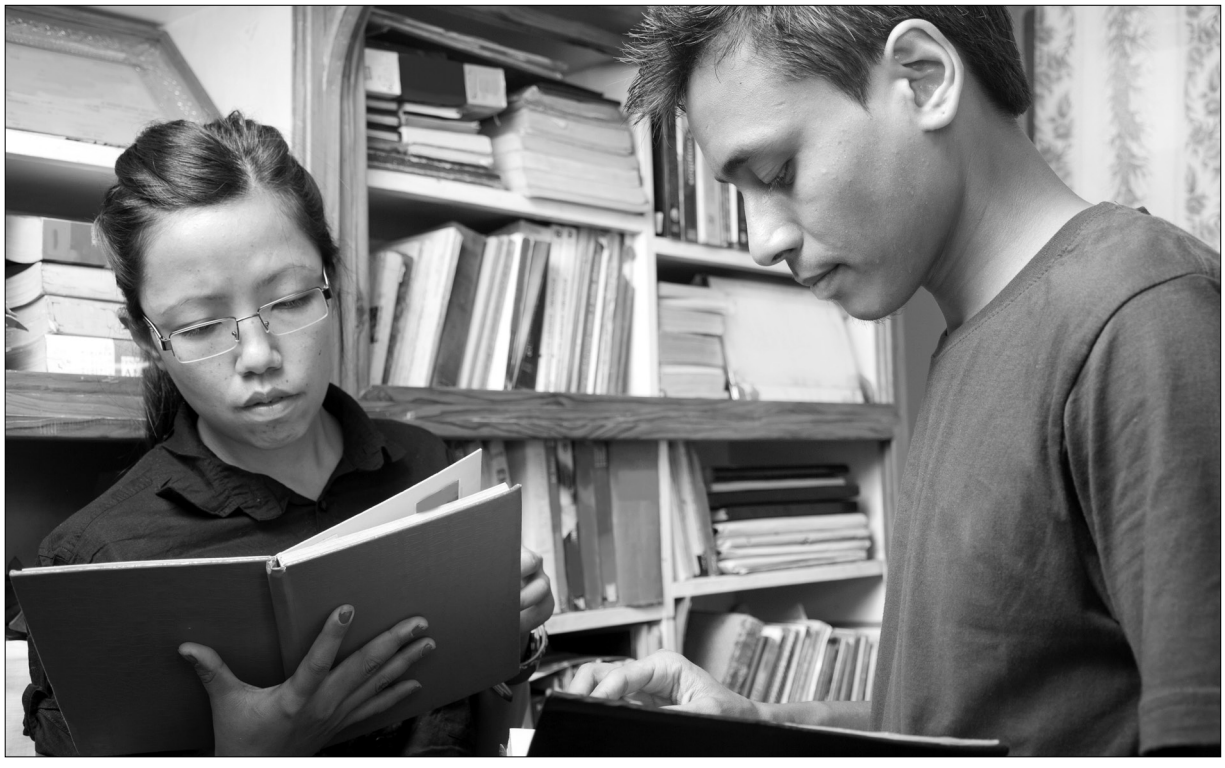
It is clear that poverty is responsible for much of our lower-than-desired test scores. Poverty means lack of quality food, poor health care, and, as discussed earlier, lack of access to books. All of these factors have a powerful negative influence on school performance: even with the best teaching in the world, children will make little progress if they are hungry, ill, and have little to read.

The Common Core Standards/National Test movement ignores the poverty factor and insists that rigorous standards and frequent testing is the path to improvement. But the Common Core will not only fail to help our students improve, it will also prevent the development of literacy.

The Common Core is bad for literacy development for several reasons. First, it bleeds funding from libraries (and many other worthy programs), and second, the standards and tests discourage free reading.

Bleeding Funding

Because of the Common Core, students will be tested far more than they were under No Child Left Behind. NCLB required tests "only" at the



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end of the year in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. But, at the time of this writing, plans are being made to extend the tests to higher and lower grades and to more subjects, such as science and social studies, and interim testing is to be added. Also, there is discussion of pretesting in the fall to be able to measure growth during the year (Krashen, "How Much"). This means a lot more time devoted to testing, and a lot more time devoted to test preparation.

It also means a lot of money. The tests will be administered online, which means that all students need to be connected to the Internet. It may cost as much as $25 billion to set up this infrastructure (Krashen and Ohanian), a huge amount of money anytime and a tremendous burden on schools these days when budgets are so tight. There is also no guarantee that the Common Core Standards and national tests will help, and plenty of reason to think they won't (Krashen and Ohanian).

If the brave new tests fail to produce improvement, we can be sure that there will be pressure to develop National Tests 2.0, with new technology; the drain on school funding will continue, and continue indefinitely, with less and less money available to spend on libraries and books. In addition, we can be sure that soon after the new infrastructure is set up, it will be declared obsolete, requiring not only upgrades but brand-new technology from time to time (remember Ethernet?).

The Nature of the Standards

As noted earlier, there are severe limits on how much of language can be consciously learned. At best, students can consciously learn only fragments of the entire system of grammar, phonics, spelling and vocabulary, and text structure. In addition, even those aspects of language that have been "learned" are difficult to apply. They are unavailable when we don't have time to think about correctness, and when we are "distracted" by meaning, focusing on how we are saying or writing rather than what we are saying or writing. In other words, our conscious knowledge is accessible and usable generally only on grammar tests or when editing (Krashen, *Explorations*).

Also, as stated earlier, direct instruction and conscious learning are not the way we acquire language. Nearly all of our competence in language is the result of understanding input, and nearly all of our competence in "academic" language is the

result of reading. Studies consistently confirm that we acquire aspects of language such as grammar along a predictable path, but language acquirers vary enormously in their rate of acquisition (Chomsky). Chomsky's research demonstrates that the rate of acquisition of grammar is related to how much reading the child has done. Of great relevance to us, her study focused on aspects of grammar that are not acquired until the school years.

The language arts standards (especially Reading: Foundational Skills, Writing, and Language) make it hard for classes to do anything but direct instruction, despite the claim that the standards do not tell teachers how to teach.

First, the English language arts standards require direct teaching: "Materials that are aligned to the standards should provide explicit and systematic instruction and diagnostic support in concepts of print, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, and fluency" (Coleman and Pimentel), as well as text structure. The language arts standards appear to fully accept the conclusions of the National Reading Panel, despite extensive and deep criticism of its results and the unimpressive results of Reading First, which was based on the National Reading Panel (Allington; Coles, *Reading*; Garan, "Beyond," *Resisting*; Krashen, "Does Intensive," "Is In-School," "More Smoke").

Second, the Common Core Standards are so demanding that there will be little time for anything not directly linked to the standards in English language arts classes. Nor should there be, according to the Publisher's Criteria: "By underscoring what matters most in the standards, the criteria illustrate what shifts must take place in the next generation of curricula, including paring away elements that distract or are at odds with the Common Core State Standards" (Coleman and Pimental). As Ashley Hastings (personal communication) has pointed out to me, the Common Core is clearly more than a "core": it is the entire apple.

Third, constant high-stakes testing ensures direct teaching. As noted above, the standards will be enforced by a massive amount of testing, which will include "interim" testing through the academic year, to make sure students stay on their "educational trajectory." Performance on these tests will have serious consequences for students, for teachers, and, we are told, even for schools of education: "We need comprehensive data systems that do three things, track students throughout their educational trajectory, second, track students back to teachers . . . track teachers back to their schools of education" (Duncan). The pressure to stick with what is on the standards will be extreme, and the force of constant testing will ensure that direct teaching methods will be used; educators will be concerned that there is no time for the target structures to emerge naturally; it may not happen in time for the next test.

The standards contain some mention of free voluntary reading, but only in connection with vocabulary acquisition, and even then it is recommended in combination with explicit instruction (Coleman and Pimentel). Also, the Publisher's Criteria makes it clear that no "easy reading" will be allowed: The materials available for free reading "need to include texts at students' own reading level as well as texts with complexity levels that will challenge and motivate students." In other words, nothing below grade level (see Krashen, "Is In-School," for arguments that "easy reading" can be beneficial).

The Result

It is inevitable that children will fail to perform well on the language standards, unless they are well read and have already acquired the required competencies outside of school. This failure will serve only to prove to teachers "that your students will never be good enough and of course that means that you will never be good enough" (Ohanian), and pave the way for even more "rigorous standards" and testing.

Discussion

Nearly every point made in this article is unknown not only to the media and general public but also to many professionals in education. In fact, the points I have tried to make are typically not even considered as possibilities, as plausible hypotheses, while the opposing views are considered to be axiomatic.

While most educators agree that reading is "good for you" and that libraries should be supported, studies showing the full power of reading and the strong and consistent impact of libraries are rarely cited, and funding for libraries has been decreasing steadily in recent years (Kelley).

In addition, it seems to be the case that nearly all policymakers believe that language skills must be diligently studied and learned, and there is little knowledge that those living in poverty have little access to books; evidence is the fact that studies and discussions of the impact of poverty rarely include lack of access to books as a factor.

The idea that our schools are broken and that the problem lies with teachers and teacher preparation is widely accepted as true and there has been only occasional discussion of the huge impact poverty has on school performance. When poverty is brought up, the claim is often that poverty doesn't matter ("No excuses."), ignoring the overwhelming evidence that it does.

Education Secretary Duncan has warned that tests will accompany the Common Core Standards and will involve a considerable expense. Duncan made it this clear in an interview in *USA Today* that standards mean tests: "If we're going to have world-class international standards, we need to have world-class evaluations behind them" (*Washington Post,* 6/15/2010). He also made it clear that the tests would cost a lot of money: While developing standards would be relatively inexpensive, developing assessments, by contrast, is, in Duncan's words, a "very heavy lift financially."

Few people, however, have any idea of the true cost of the tests and few people realize how this money could be better spent. Few realize the extraordinary difficulty of the Common Core Standards (how many have read the standards or Publisher's Criteria?), and few are aware that the Publisher's Criteria attempts to exclude material not related to the core from being discussed in class.

The solution to this situation could not be simpler: protect children from the effects of poverty, which means increase breakfast and lunch programs, improve health care (e.g., school nurses; see Berliner, "Poverty") and improve support for libraries in high poverty areas. The source of funding is obvious: reduce testing. Keep only those tests that are truly useful and follow the principle of No Unnecessary Testing (NUT).

It is tempting to recommend that the standards themselves should be modified, but the kind of repair necessary must go much deeper. There is no justification for having national standards and national tests in the first place.

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Reading Herodotus

If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately.
—Elizabeth Bishop, "At the Fishhouses"

If you meet my student and
hear the voice slip from his mouth
like gauze torn from a wound,
you'll learn of his hungry flight
from Saddam, hiding out with mom
and brother, then fording a river
when guns held the bridge,
crossing the sand, hoping in a line

of American troops. Herodotus,
himself, would admire our print
accounts of kings, fools, blood,
and broken cities offered up
in lines of rising smoke
as if to ward off fate. Nearby,
in ancient sites, burnt flesh
has dried to dust, and stones
still hold transfigured grief.

The immediate ache in your bones
when you meet my student means
you're not yet deaf. If you dip
your hand into this opaque river,
no limb comes out, no skin,
no word, but one inhuman note—
the carwreck shriek of a mother
over a boy's frail form.

—Michael Lauchlan

Michael Lauchlan's poems have appeared in many publications, including *New England Review, Virginia Quarterly Review, The North American Review, Ninth Letter, Natural Bridge, Innisfree, Crab Creek, The Tower Journal, Nimrod, The Dark Horse,* and *The Cortland Review,* and have been included in *Abandon Automobile,* from WSU Press and in *A Mind Apart,* from Oxford. He was recently awarded the *Consequence* Prize in Poetry.