

# Interview

## Stephen Krashen (SK) talks to Beniko Mason (BM)

Dr. Mason is a faculty member at Shitennoji University and its Junior College in Osaka, Japan. She has been doing research on Story Listening and Story Reading (see "Storiesfirst.org") for several decades. Her publications have appeared in many specialized journals such as *System*, the *RELC Journal*, the *TESOL Quarterly*, and *ITL: Review of Applied Linguistics*. She has demonstrated her methods and has presented her findings at conferences in the United States, France, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, China, Russia, Laos, Turkey and Germany.

**SK:** A great deal of your work in second and foreign language teaching has focused on free voluntary reading. What stimulated your interest?

**BM:** My first research project involving free reading, changed everything! I call it the Sai Rishu study (the “retakers” study) (Mason & Krashen, 1997a). Sai-Rishu students were those who had failed in the English course in the past, and they were taking this course for the necessary credit, for graduation. It was a group of students who did not like English, did not want to study English, felt bad about themselves for failing the class and did not want to attend the class.

I used a regular text book in the first semester, which was given to me by the university. It did not work, of course. I used SSR (self-selected reading) in the second semester to find out whether SSR would work with these unmotivated failing students. I compared this class to a regular freshmen class that I was teaching at the same time using the regular course book. The Sai-Rishu class was a mixture of students from the 2nd year to the 4th year.

The result was that their progress was faster than the other class who used the regular course book, and they caught up with the regular class in English proficiency at the end of the second

semester. The study also revealed that SSR gave the students hope in English study, [and they] developed motivation and confidence in themselves.

As it had been strongly believed that students had to be motivated to study and improve, it was a surprise that they did not have to be motivated to get better. Reading caused motivation. The SSR experience changed them.

I was encouraged with these results and began investigating more. Soon, I found that: 1) SSR was superior to traditional reading methods for literacy and language development; 2) SSR developed reading speed better than the traditional method; and 3) SSR was not only effective with students who liked to study English in the traditional way, but also with students at lower proficiency levels (Mason & Krashen, 1997b).

It was believed in those days that in order to develop writing skills in English, students should be engaged in writing exercises in English. Many teachers assigned writing homework in English and the teachers corrected their writing, but Japanese students were not getting any better in writing. It seemed like it was [a] wasted effort for both teachers and students. But in the same study (Mason & Krashen, 1997b), we found that SSR alone caused writing improvement.

During this time, I designed my reading program in such a way that the students do not have to waste their time searching for books that they could read and that they liked. I read most of the Heinemann Graded Readers, all the 200-headword Penguin (Pearson) readers, some from other publishers at different levels, many authentic books for young adults and best sellers, in order to see which ones were well written and interesting. I wanted my students' experience with book reading to be successful every time, so they would not lose interest in reading. I also did not test students on what they read. My concern was how to encourage my students to read more. Without having them read substantial numbers of books, I could not evaluate the true effect of reading.

After I saw that reading alone caused significant improvements in writing, I decided to reconsider the validity of the "Output Hypothesis", the hypothesis that we learn to write by writing, and by getting our errors corrected. I did an experiment using three groups who read about the same number of pages, but who did different amounts and kinds of writing assignments. The results did not support the Output Hypothesis—increasing output and adding corrective feedback did not increase improvement over and above SSR alone on any on the measures (cloze test, writing test and TOEIC reading section). In other words, reading alone was more time efficient than reading plus writing, or reading plus writing and correction (Mason, 2004).

In other studies, I found that reading alone resulted in significant gains on the TOEFL (Mason, 2006) and TOEIC; and that SSR was effective not only for school-age students, but also for adults and senior adults who only read, or read and heard stories in class (Mason, 2011, 2013a, 2013b; Mason and Krashen, 2017)

After all these studies, it became clearer and clearer to me that SSR developed many skills for different age groups and different proficiency

levels. It became more and more obvious through my studies, that comprehensible input by way of reading had a strong influence in developing not only reading, but also on listening and grammar.

I came to the conclusion that the important question was not whether reading (input) was the cause of language acquisition—now that we are confident of the validity of the input and reading hypotheses, we should investigate how to get students reading. The answer is simple: Arrange the books so that they will have success every time; provide access to interesting reading without accountability, and do not require conscious learning.

We also want to know how much reading it takes to show meaningful progress. My estimate is that for low intermediate students, a doable reading goal is about 100 to 150 pages per week. We have estimated from students' data that students gain about .6 points on the TOEIC for each hour they read, more than 200 points per year of reading one hour per day (Krashen & Mason, 2015; Mason & Krashen, 2017).

I have been examining the effects of reading for the last 30 years and my interests have never shifted to other areas in the Second Language Acquisition field. I have always felt that the most important question that we need to obtain the answer to in this field is whether the approach should be intrinsic or extrinsic, whether it should be meaning-based or skill-based, whether it should be pure input or eclectic.

No one disagrees with the fundamental concept of the Input, or Comprehension Hypothesis anymore. The hypothesis, however, has evolved from the Input Hypothesis to the Compelling Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 2011a; Krashen, Lee, & Lao, 2017). I suggest that the words "rich" and "frequent" be added.

These conditions have been mentioned in books and papers in the past, but because these two words have not been stressed enough, there are

methods that claim to be CI-based but actually include more skill-based activities than comprehensible input, and do not result in the full effects of the Comprehension Hypothesis.

My interest has been to investigate which is better: Methods that are input alone, or a combination, or eclectic. I am glad that I have stayed with this question. My conclusion is that input alone is more effective, as well as more time and cost efficient (Mason, 2013c).

**SK:** Some people refer to self-selected reading as extensive reading. You no longer use this term. Why?

**BM:** Extensive Reading (ER) and Self-Selected Reading (SSR) are theoretically different and they use different methods. They are based on different assumptions and approaches.

ER is based on the traditional approach to language teaching. It claims that Extensive Reading (ER) develops fluency and Intensive Reading (IR) develops accuracy. SSR, Self-Selected Reading, takes the position that self-selected reading develops both accuracy and fluency.

I have altered SSR to add a separate pre-stage, “Guided SSR”, or GSSR. In this stage students choose books on their own from a collection that has been pre-selected by the teacher. This is of great help to beginning level students, who are unfamiliar with what books are available and need some help in choosing what is right for them.

The GSSR stage helps ensure that students will not waste time, that they will be more efficient in selecting books that are interesting and at their level. They will be able to start reading on the first day of the new semester. It avoids the most frequent complaint I hear: students telling me that they can’t find interesting reading material. When students have immediate success with

almost each book from the beginning, the library becomes a pleasant place for them to go to.

The GSSR period need not last very long. Some students become free voluntary readers in the first semester. As part of GSSR, students keep records of the books that they read (the number of pages and the amount of time she/he spent for reading the book, and a short summary and a reflection of the book.) GSSR does not include formal comprehension questions but does include occasional checking/sharing reflections and opinions of books that are recorded in the students’ notebook.

Returning to the question why I do not use the term ER for my reading program, ER is part of the Eclectic Approach. ER makes the students: 1) do Intensive Reading; 2) answer comprehension questions; 3) write summaries in English; 4) talk about the story in English; 5) study vocabulary and do other post-reading activities. ER does not assume that reading alone is sufficient for progress in language development.

**SK:** In your presentations and papers, you have emphasized the difference between measuring overall acquisition and efficiency of acquisition. Why is this important?

**BM:** If a method is effective, it means that it produces the desired improvements. If a method is efficient, it means that it produces improvements without wasting time, energy and money. Any teaching method can be effective when we spend enough time and money on applying it.

Language education research often compares methods without sufficient regard to the theory underlying the method. Some methods are not pure manifestations of one theory but are combinations, or “eclectic”. The results of this kind of research do not deal with [the] core

question of whether a method based on comprehensible input alone is more efficient than a mixed method.

There has been a discussion whether it is even possible to use pure input methods. Some people cannot even imagine the idea of just having students read in class, or just listen to a story in class, but it is possible.

When these pure methods are used, studies show surprising results every time. Input alone is more effective and is several times more efficient than eclectic methods. (Mason, 2004, 2007, 2018; Mason & Krashen, 2004, 2018; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009). These methods are more efficient in two different ways: One, greater gains per unit time in language proficiency (I noticed how efficiency was calculated in a study done by Dupuy and Krashen (1993). I began to apply the idea of dividing the gain by the time it took to produce the gain. This was the beginning of my efficiency studies.) Two, greater gains with less money and less energy spent by teachers;

The notion of efficiency in language teaching interests me, because I want to help the so-called “slower” and “less gifted” students, those who score well below the mean, those students whose spirits are beaten, and who don’t know how to do as well as the “smart” ones. Use of more efficient (and pleasant) methods evens the playing field and changes disappointed students into motivated students who enjoy going to class.

**SK:** You have emphasized [on] “Story Listening” in recent years. Why is this important? Why don’t you use the term “story telling”? What is the difference?

**BM:** It is a good idea to provide auditory input in a language program. I started Story Listening (SL) in my reading program because students

wanted to do something besides reading in class. Having the students read in class all the time was almost perfect, but it was not enough for some students and most students needed more auditory input. Story Listening is a good method to introduce new words and students enjoy listening to stories. I have found that SL can be done at all levels, from beginning to advanced.

Story Listening does not have a grammatical syllabus and is not based on a pre-selected list of words we expect students to master. Rather, the teacher tells the story and uses drawings, explanations and occasional translation to help the students understand important words, phrases and grammar to help make the story more comprehensible.

Although the goal is comprehension of the story, not mastery of certain words, Story Listening results in impressive vocabulary acquisition. As I told more stories in class, the students began to remark that they remembered many words from hearing stories even after several weeks. In the studies I did, I found that the rate of vocabulary acquisition from listening to stories was much faster than when students use a textbook based on the traditional approach (Mason & Krashen, 2004, 2018; Mason, et. al, 2009). This occurs without pre-teaching of vocabulary and without comprehension questions during or after SL.

I prefer to use folktales and fairytales for Story Listening. These stories have stood the test of time and use themes that are as interesting today as they were 200 to 2000 years ago. In my opinion, personal stories can be interesting, but are not always interesting to everyone and not always appropriate. In Story Listening, the story does the entertaining. The teacher does not have to bring in costumes, candles, stuffed animals and other objects. Only a blackboard and colored chalk are needed.

**SK:** Some people think it common sense that the truth must be “in the middle”, that both studying vocabulary and grammar are important. Yet you and some others argue that time is better spent hearing and reading stories. Shouldn’t we avoid extreme positions?

**BM:** The Input Hypothesis is not an extreme position. It is the most natural and ordinary way of acquiring a language. People have acquired foreign languages from listening to what they understand from the beginning of human history. The traditional, skill-based approach is an extremist method based on the experiments on animals. It is based on a theory that has no empirical support in language acquisition and students do not consider to be pleasant. My students have told me that Story Listening and Reading reduce their burden, and that they could continue listening and reading indefinitely, because it is easy and fun.

Teaching reading using Story Listening and GSSR is easy. When the teacher has collected 100 or more stories to tell and has selected 100 or more good graded readers, the teacher can guide her beginning level students (in my case, junior college students) to the low- intermediate level in one year.

So many students have been suffering with English studies. In Japan, almost 95% of high school students say that they are poor at English while the universities, companies and government require high TOEIC scores for admission, and employment. Students have been painfully struggling to achieve high scores, but their efforts have been in vain.

The popular expression “There is no royal road to learning”, suggests that students need to devote hours of hard and painful work to reach advanced levels in language acquisition. This is false. Language acquisition is easy, fun, and fast and does not cost a lot of money. Story Listening

and Self-Selected Reading are not extremist approaches. They use the most natural possible ways to acquire a language.

**SK:** How many languages do you speak? Has your experience with other languages been helpful to you as a researcher, theoretician and teacher?

**BM:** I understood right away what the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985, 2003) suggested, as I had firsthand experience in acquiring German and English from living in countries where these languages are spoken. But I do not believe that staying in Germany for ten months and living in the US for nine years are the reasons for my language ability in German and English.

I have seen many people who did not acquire the language of the country they stayed in for decades. Going to the country is helpful, but it is not necessary. The main ingredient is comprehensible input. Aural input certainly does help, but I must point out that I read a lot in these languages, especially English, after I came back to Japan. I think that reading is the most important ingredient for speaking and writing (Krashen, 2004, 2011b).

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