Krashen, S. 2020. Optimal Input. Language Magazine, 19(3):29-30. (Part of "2020 Visions.")

Recent studies support the hypothesis that methods of language teaching consistent with what we are call "optimal input" result in more language acquisition and promise to be more pleasant for students and teachers.

The "optimal input" hypothesis says that we acquire language and develop literacy from input, from understanding what we hear and read, NOT from speaking or writing. Our ability to speak and write fluently and accurately is the RESULT of acquiring language from input. The evidence for this includes studies showing that (1) more output (speaking and writing) does not result in more language development, (2) language acquisition can occur without any output at all, (3) increasing input increases the quality of output, and (4) forcing output is a cause of considerable anxiety.

I discussed optimal input years ago, and this concept has been deepened and improved on by Beniko Mason. Optimal input has these four characteristics:

(1) It is comprehensible. This does not mean that every detail is comprehensible: Input can be quite comprehensible even if there is some "noise" in the input, some incomprehensible bits. This includes unknown vocabulary and grammar rules that have not yet been acquired but are not important for comprehension. In other words, language acquisition does not require that you understand every word and every part of every word, but language acquirers should understand most of it.
(2) Optimal input is "compelling," so interesting you temporarily forget that it is in another language. If input is comprehensible and compelling, acquirers will often not notice the noise in the input.
(3) Optimal input is <u>rich</u> in language that contributes to the message and flow of the story or text. The language included in the input also gives the reader support in understanding and therefore acquiring new aspects of language.
It is not necessary to make sure that certain grammar and vocabulary are used: Rich input automatically includes new, unacquired language that acquirers are ready for (i+1).
(4) It takes a great deal of comprehensible compelling rich input to achieve competence. Optimal input is <u>abundant</u>, which will provide numerous opportunities for acquisition of new language.

The result of getting optimal input is subconscious language acquisition: Language acquirers will be focused on the story and on the message, and will not always be aware that acquisition has happened. This knowledge will be represented subconsciously in their minds.

We are currently examining these hypotheses:

Stories and self-selected reading: **The best forms of optimal input we have found so far are (1) listening to stories, stories that are made comprehensible in a variety of ways, including drawings, occasional translation, and explanations. This kind of Story Listening, developed by Beniko Mason, is a powerful and pleasant way to lead students to another form of optimal input: (2) self-selected reading.**
Prof. Mason recommends providing large amounts of easy written input: In her English classes in Japan, she provides students with access to hundreds of books in easy English (sometimes called "graded readers") and helps students find books that are right for them. Mason calls this "guided self-selected reading," or GSSR. GSSR eventually gives students the competence to read and understand authentic reading material,

We have ignored the importance of GSSR, and have underestimated how much of it is necessary.

Immersion. **Popular ways of acquiring second languages only work if they contain a great deal of optimal input. A good example is "immersion," living in the country where the language is spoken. Immersion may contain a great deal of optimal input (interesting conversations and reading), or it may contain mostly non-optimal input (e.g. short superficial conversations).**

When acquirers obtain optimal input, individual differences in rate of acquisition are diminished and may disappear. In other words, given the right conditions we are all "gifted" language acquirers.

I conclude with a case history that is consistent with our current hypotheses. Prof. Nooshan Ashtari told me about Mahmoud Hessabi, a world-famous physicist from Iran who passed away in 1992, at the age of 90. Prof. Hessabi spoke several languages, and he had lived in the countries where the languages were spoken. But he was also highly competent in German, despite not having had a German immersion experience. On a trip to Germany, he wanted to speak to a store employee about an item in the store, but could not. He decided right then to acquire German. He was 60 years old at the time. He made it a regular practice to "study" German for 30 minutes every evening for the next 30 years.

"Study" included a great deal of reading. He began by reading "short and simple" books used for teaching German to language students, and after a few years was reading complicated German books on philosophy. He eventually wrote letters in German to a colleague who was a native speaker of German. She wrote to him saying, "If someone didn't know you personally, they would think that your mother tongue is German."

Note that Prof. Hessabi's approach included a version of Guided Self-Selected Reading developed by Beniko Mason, described above. The short and simple books provided the linguistic competence that made reading authentic books possible.

This case is not the only one showing impressive progress in a second language through reading. What is clear is that the path from "simple and short" reading to authentic reading deserves more attention.