

TOM MEANS INTERVIEWS STEPHEN KRASHEN

One of TILCA's editors, Tom Means (The City University of New York at BMCC), had the chance to interview the legendary SLA scholar Stephen Krashen (Professor Emeritus, University of Southern California) about his contributions to the field and his current interests in SLA and literacy.

MEANS: Professor Krashen, thank you for your many contributions to the field. What areas of language/literacy acquisition have you been most interested in lately?

KRASHEN: A big interest of mine in the last few years has been writing, the important insight that writing and the process of revision is the key to intellectual progress and clearer thinking. "Meaning is what you end up with, not what you start out with." Of course, many writers know all about this: "mediocre writers write, good writers rewrite." (Neil Simon). Kurt Vonnegut was certainly talking about me when he wrote this: "...writing allows even a stupid person to seem halfway intelligent, if only that person will write the same thought over and over again, improving it just a little bit each time... a lot like inflating a blimp with a bicycle pump. Anybody can do it. All it takes is time." And I must include the insight that has probably cured more cases of writers' block than any other: "The first draft of anything is shit" (Hemingway).

MEANS: Many of us have been greatly influenced by the five hypotheses in your Monitor Model, especially by comprehensible input as expressed by $i+1$. Would you still present it the same way today?

KRASHEN: I am thinking of adding one more: In addition to the Affective Filter Hypothesis, the Output Filter Hypothesis: This filter prevents you from using, what you have acquired. It explains why we can't (really won't) speak in accents that mark us as a member of a group we do not feel we belong to. Many of us, for example, can to at least some extent, speak English using a British accent, but when we meet somebody from London, we don't start using it. Peter Ustinov commented on this in an interview. His French accent in French movies, according to native speakers, is totally convincing, but when he speaks French in "real life" he says he has an English accent.

MEANS: If some of our readers only have a superficial understanding of the comprehension hypothesis of SLA (versus the skill-building hypothesis), what would you like to point out that is fundamentally different about the two?

KRASHEN: I have to work harder to clear this up – and this note is part of that effort. The Skill-Building Hypothesis assumes that we cannot subconsciously “acquire” language, we can only consciously “learn” it. It assumes that we improve by producing language using our consciously learned rules, that we improve our knowledge of the rules by getting corrected, and by using them in speaking or writing until they become “automatic.”

I had also assumed that the Skill-Building Hypothesis was correct until my own research and reading the work of others (especially Leonard Newmark) gradually changed my thinking. We acquire language not by “study” or “practice” but by understanding what we hear and read, paying attention only to the meaning. This, of course, will happen when the message is genuinely interesting. (I prefer the word “compelling,” so interesting that acquirers are not focused on the fact that they are listening to or reading in another language.) When this happens, unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar are gradually acquired.

MEANS: Your recommendations on free voluntary reading have also been very influential to many of us, can you say a few words about its importance?

KRASHEN: Self-selected free voluntary reading (including fiction) may be even more important than we thought. Evidence is now emerging that it is not only a primary means of developing vocabulary, grammar, spelling ability, writing ability and of course reading ability (e.g. Krashen, 2004), it is also an important source of knowledge: Stanovich and Cunningham’s study (1993) provided strong evidence suggesting that those who are more familiar with current authors, magazines and films know more about science, social studies, current events, personal finance, health, “daily living technology,” cultural knowledge, and “multicultural literacy.” Familiarity with current authors and magazines emerged as a stronger predictor of knowledge than school success, as measured by grades.

MEANS: Do you see a similarly beneficial role for 'free voluntary' viewing of TV and film?

KRASHEN: I don’t know. This question deserves serious research. Stanovich and Cunningham reported that more familiarity with films was related to more general knowledge but more familiarity with TV was not. I don’t watch movies and watch very little TV these days, but my wife and I occasionally watch reruns of The Golden Girls. It is excellent!!!

MEANS: What else would you like to say about the art/science of effective language teaching?

KRASHEN: Our strongest ally in the school where we teach is the school librarian. The school library is often the only affordable source of interesting, comprehensible reading material available to our students. What we want is not just a few books, but a lot of them, hundreds, so students can choose what they like and need not finish every book they start to read.

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