Compelling Comprehensible Input, Academic Language and School Libraries

Stephen Krashen and Janice Bland

Abstract

There is abundant research confirming that we pass through three stages on the path to full development of literacy, which includes the acquisition of academic language. The stages are: hearing stories, doing a great deal of self-selected reading, followed by reading for our own interest in our chosen specialization. At stages two and three, the reading is highly interesting or compelling to the reader. It is also specialized; there is no attempt to cover a wide variety. The research confirms that the library, in particular *school* library, makes a powerful contribution at all three stages: for many living in poverty it is the only place to find books for recreational reading or specialized interest reading, with the librarian serving as the guide on how to locate information as well as supplier of compelling reading. The expertise of certified librarians is pivotal for compelling reading in a foreign language, such as EFL worldwide and ELLs in the US, as well as compelling reading in children's heritage languages.

Keywords: compelling comprehensible input, academic language, literacy development, school libraries, certified librarians, poverty

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Comprehensible Input and Compelling Comprehensible Input

There is, by now, a great deal of evidence to support the 'Comprehension Hypothesis', the idea that we acquire language and advance the development of literacy when we understand messages (see for example Krashen 2003, 2004). In a number of recent papers, it has been hypothesized that the most effective input for second as well as first language acquisition and full literacy development contains messages that are highly interesting to the reader. In fact, optimal input may be more than interesting – optimal input is *compelling*, so interesting that the acquirer is hardly aware that it is in a different language, so compelling that the reader is 'lost in the book' (Nell, 1988) or 'in the reading zone' (Atwell, 2007), a concept identical to what Csikszentmihalyi (1992) refers to as 'flow'. Flow is complete absorption in an activity, so absorbing that one's sense of time and self diminishes or even disappears.

Compelling Comprehensible Input and Academic Language: The Three Stages

An exciting hypothesis is that Compelling Comprehensible Input, first discussed in Krashen (2011a), is the path to highest levels of language competence, not only to enhanced levels of creative language ability and critical literacy (Bland 2013), but also to what is sometimes referred to as *academic language*. Compelling Comprehensible Input refers to both first and second language acquisition. The path to academic language is not, in other words, through deliberate study of the vocabulary, grammar and text structure of academic or specialized texts. It is incidentally absorbed, or acquired, to a large extent through reading.

It has been hypothesized (Krashen, 2012a) that there are three stages in the development of *academic language* competence:

Stage 1. For the mother tongue, the first stage is listening to stories and hearing books read aloud. For second language acquisition among school-aged (and adult) language learners, the first stage is usually a language class, ideally one that includes a great deal of Compelling Comprehensible Input.

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Stage 2. The second stage, for both first and second language development, consists of self-selected recreational reading. The reading is narrow, focusing only on favourite authors and genres, and topics of deep interest to the reader. Children and young adults tend to find adventure stories, horror, fantasy stories and non-fiction on topics that fascinate them compelling, as an empirical study in Germany clearly shows (Harmgarth, 1999, p. 24); boys particularly are strongly attracted by graphic novels and books with male protagonists (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 11), and girls are often passionate about young adult novels that focus on friendships and teen romance (Hesse, 2009, p. 14).

Popularly chosen recreational reading will not bring apprentice readers to the highest levels of academic language competence, but it prepares them to read more demanding texts: the language acquired and the knowledge gained through recreational reading helps make academic reading more comprehensible. Thus recreational reading is the bridge between conversational language and academic language.

Stage 3. The third stage is academic or specialized reading in a chosen area that readers often discover for themselves, and that they find particularly compelling. More challenging texts are read with the same degree of enthusiasm as the recreational reading at stage two. In fact, for the reader at this stage it *is* recreational reading. And, as at stage two, the reading is usually self-selected and narrow, with a focus on the readers' interests.

At both stages two and three, the reading is done because readers are interested in the message. The development of language and literary competence is a by-product, unexpected and sometimes not recognized.

Empirical Studies Abound

There is a substantial body of research supporting the effectiveness of self-selected recreational reading, included studies of in-school reading ('sustained silent reading'), case studies and correlational studies (Krashen, 2004, 2007). The following examples detail a few cases that illustrate the by-product of compelling reading: language and literary competence and overall literacy development.

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An unpleasant incident. In one case, unexpected rapid improvement due to recreational reading led to an awkward incident. Cohen (1997, reported in Krashen, 2004, pp. 23-24), now an English teacher in Israel, grew up in Turkey and attended an English-language medium school beginning at age 12. Cohen reports that after only two months in the programme, she started to read in English:

> … as many books in English as I could get hold of. I had a rich, ready made library of English books at home (…) I became a member of the local British Council's library and occasionally purchased English books in bookstores (…) By the first year of middle school I had become an avid reader of English.

Her reading, however, got her in trouble:

> I had a new English teacher who assigned us two compositions for homework. She returned them me to ungraded, furious. She wanted to know who had helped me write them. They were my personal work. I had not even used the dictionary. She would not believe me. She pointed at a few underlined sentences and some vocabulary and asked me how I knew them; they were well beyond the level of the class. I had not even participated much in class. I was devastated. There and then and many years later I could not explain how I knew them. I just did.

Highly literate dyslexics. Fink (1995/6) studied twelve people who were considered dyslexic when they were young, who all became not only skilled readers, but also reached superlative levels of literacy. Nine out of the twelve published scholarly works and one was a Nobel laureate. Eleven of the twelve reported that they finally learned to read between the ages of 10 and 12 (p. 273), and one learned to read in 12th grade. According to Fink, these readers had a lot in common:

> As children, each had a passionate personal interest, a burning desire to know more about a discipline that required reading. Spurred by this passionate interest, all read voraciously, seeking and reading everything they could get their hands on about a single intriguing topic. (Fink, 1995/6, pp. 274-275)

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In other words, they all found Compelling Comprehensible Input. In a later study, Fink (2002) reports on 60 highly accomplished adults with dyslexia:

> What did I learn from the interviews and test results? First, I learned that the 60 men and women succeeded as readers and as professionals by following their own interests and passions. Driven by curiosity and a passion for knowledge, they read avidly (although slowly) to find out more about their topic of interest (…). Their own fascination drove them to read, experiment, and pursue a career that intrigued them. (Fink, 2002, n.p.)

Self-selected reading is present in the histories of many eminent people: Simonton (1988, p. 11) summarized a number of studies of the development of creativity and concluded that 'omnivorous reading in childhood and adolescence correlates positively with ultimate adult success'. Highlighting the plurality of the concept *literacy*, a UNESCO Position Paper maintains 'Today, the international community no longer sees literacy as a mere stand-alone skill, but instead as a social practice contributing to broader purposes of lifelong learning' (2004, p. 10). Literacy is generally accepted as a superordinate category, including literary competence as well as creative and academic (first and second) language competences. The next section focuses on the role school libraries can play in literacy development.

School Libraries

If the Compelling Comprehensible Input hypothesis is correct, and if readers vary widely in their reading tastes, we have to conclude that easy access to a wide variety of reading material is vital. Despite the growing popularity of e-books, this still means libraries: 'Kindelization' is limited largely to the middle class (Krashen, 2011b), libraries are the only sources of any kind of book for many children of poverty. In addition, certified librarians are key for unrestricted literacy development. Particularly in order to support foreign language acquisition and children's heritage language development, a librarian's expertise is crucial in adequately helping young readers locate their specialized reading interests, in the huge area of children's literature, from fantasy to non-fiction.

Many studies show the positive impact of school libraries on literacy development.

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One of the first was Gaver (1963), who found that children in the US in schools with larger school libraries made better gains in reading than children in schools with smaller school libraries, who in turn made better gains than children in schools that had only classroom libraries.

In a further series of studies in the US, Keith Curry Lance and colleagues have provided consistent and striking research evidence on the impact of school libraries, showing that in many cases even when poverty is statistically controlled, better libraries are associated with higher reading test scores. Lance and colleagues concluded that three independent factors were related to reading achievement: the number of books, the presence of a certified librarian, and staffing (help for the librarian) (see Lance, Welborn & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993; Lance, 1994; Lance, Hamilton-Pennell, Rodney, Petersen & Sitter, 1999; Lance, Rodney & Hamilton-Pennell, 2000; Lance & Hofschire, 2012).

The results of more recent studies have not only confirmed Lance's results, but also suggest that the presence of a library can ameliorate the effects of poverty. In Krashen, Lee & McQuillan (2011), the strongest predictors of 2006 PISA Reading scores in 40 countries were poverty and the percentage of children in the country being studied who had access to a school library of 500 books or more. Moreover, the effect of access to a library was nearly as strong as the effect of poverty, the former positive and the latter negative. Similar results have been reported by Achterman (2008), for high school students in California.

In Europe the existence of school libraries is 'scattered and diverse' (Das, 2011, p. 287). To take Germany as an example, the provision of school libraries is in most areas wholly inadequate, as Boelens' research has highlighted:

• Concern about the performance of German students in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2000) has caused comments about the neglect of school libraries in the German school system.

• The number of educated librarians who work in school libraries may not exceed 100. There are between 35,000 and 40,000 schools in Germany.

• There is no standardised professional training for school librarians. There are less than 100 professionally trained school librarians (teacher-librarians) working in school libraries in Germany. (Boelens 2010: Appendix III, 54)

What is it about the *school* library that makes it effective as partner in literacy education? Libraries make two pivotal contributions: the first is as a source of reading material for pleasure reading. The second is as a storehouse of information, with librarians as the guide to finding the information needed through teaching information literacy: 'how to articulate information needs, search for it and retrieve it efficiently, understand and evaluate its authenticity and reliability, communicate it, and then use it to make decisions and solve problems' (ALIES: A Library In Every School!). In other words, libraries contribute to both stages 2 and 3 on the path to academic language competence.

Most academic programmes for librarians focus on the function of libraries as a source of information, and librarians are trained in the use and management of data, for example in the US with its Common Core emphasis on academic language competence. But both the Common Core and libraries have neglected the library as a source of pleasure reading: without stage 2 as detailed above, stage 3 is nearly impossible.

Evidence for this conclusion comes from studies showing that access to books from sources other than the library also predicts reading achievement (Evans, Kelley, Sikora, & Treiman, 2010; Tse, Lam, Ip, Lam, Loh, & Tso, 2010). Significantly, the findings of Schubert and Becker (2010) indicated that the home print environment was a strong predictor of reading achievement, even when income, parental education, aspects of schooling, language used at home, and other aspects of the home environment were controlled. The researchers concluded that the home print environment was as strong a predictor as socio-economic status.

This research leads us to this generalization:
ACCESS > COMPELLING READING > LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

The School Library Is Essential

The UNESCO/ International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) School Library Manifesto (UNESCO/IFLA, 1999) states: 'The school library is essential to every long-term strategy for literacy, education, information provision and economic, social and cultural development. (…) School Libraries must have adequate and sustained funding for trained staff, materials, technologies and facilities'. The Manifesto also

emphasizes *reading pleasure* in two of its eight goals for school libraries:

> • developing and sustaining in children the habit and enjoyment of reading and learning, and the use of libraries throughout their lives;
>
> • offering opportunities for experiences in creating and using information for knowledge, understanding, imagination and enjoyment. (UNESCO/ IFLA, 1999)

Significantly, it states: 'It has been demonstrated that, when librarians and teachers work together, students achieve higher levels of literacy, reading, learning, problem-solving and information and communication technology skills'. However, it has been shown that in the case of ELLs in the US, for example, students often have no idea what the school library can offer, and their parents as well are in frequent cases unaware of what is in libraries and how they operate (Constantino, 1995).

In a paper that reports on the launch of a European Network for School Libraries and Information Literacy (ENSIL) in 2003, Lourense Das writes 'so far there is no EU vision and policy on school libraries or the promotion of school libraries' (2011, p. 288). This is despite several decades of international research that has shown the vital role of school libraries, resulting in students who perform better when 'there is special attention to (and pleasure in) reading, information literacy, transforming information into knowledge, and using that knowledge to process new information' (Das, 2011, p. 288).

The school library provides access, often the only source of access, of compelling reading for many children of poverty, who in general have little access to books at home, in their neighbourhoods, or at school (Krashen, 2004, pp. 68-75; Krashen, 2012b, Bland, 2013, p. 27, p. 74). The lack of access to books for those living in poverty helps explain their frequent low levels of literacy development. It is likely that this relationship will continue until e-readers and e-books are far less expensive and far more available than they are now – though, even leaving aside the issue of school libraries and information literacy, whether an e-reader can provide the comfort and pleasure that books can afford is currently a hotly debated issue.

In the case of EFL worldwide, it is not only the children of poverty who have no access to compelling reading in English. Apart from *Harry Potter* and perhaps *The Hunger Games*, compelling titles for children and young adults in the lingua franca are not at all

well known by parents generally, as well as being very expensive. Most parents will be at a loss to choose compelling books for their children in English. The library with a certified librarian can supply this access immediately, and free of charge.

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