An introduction to the work of Stephen Krashen

Second language learning
Krashen believes that there is no fundamental difference between the way we acquire our first language and our subsequent languages. He claims that humans have an innate ability that guides the language learning process. Infants learn their mother tongue simply by listening attentively to spoken language that is (made) meaningful to them. Foreign languages are acquired in the same way.

Krashen synthesizes his theories of second/foreign language learning in what is usually referred to as the Monitor Model. The Monitor Model has 5 components:

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis
There are two ways of developing language ability: by acquisition and by learning. Acquisition is a sub-conscious process, as in the case of a child learning its own language or an adult 'picking up' a second language simply by living and working in a foreign country. Learning is the conscious process of developing a foreign language through language lessons and a focus on the grammatical features of that language.

The Natural Order Hypothesis
Language is acquired in a predictable order by all learners. This order does not depend on the apparent simplicity or complexity of the grammatical features involved. The natural order of acquisition cannot be influenced by direct teaching of features that the learner is not yet ready to acquire.

The Monitor Hypothesis
We are able to use what we have learned (in Krashen's sense) about the rules of a language in monitoring (or self-correcting) our language output. Clearly, this is possible in the correction of written work. It is much more difficult when engaging in regular talk.

The Input Hypothesis
We acquire language in one way only: when we are exposed to input (written or spoken language) that is comprehensible to us. Comprehensible input is the necessary but also sufficient condition for language acquisition to take place. It requires no effort on the part of the learner.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis
Comprehensible input will not result in language acquisition if that input is filtered out before it can reach the brain's language processing faculties. The filtering may occur because of anxiety, poor self-esteem or low motivation.
Comments
Krashen's Monitor Model has attracted enormous attention from psychologists, fellow linguists and educators. His theories have been criticised for a perceived lack of scientific rigour and for his downplaying of the importance of language output and grammar instruction. Nevertheless, the Monitor Model has been extremely influential in language teaching pedagogy, and it is the basis for ESL instruction at Frankfurt International School.

Implications for mainstream teachers
Firstly, if teachers make their classroom instruction comprehensible, then not only will the ESL students learn the subject content but they will be acquiring English at the same time. All teachers of non-native English students should regard themselves as teachers of language too.

Secondly, ESL students are often anxious in mainstream classes. Teachers should seek ways to reduce the students' affective filter in order that they can profit from the comprehensible input they receive.

Free voluntary reading
Free voluntary reading (FVR) is the reading of any book (newspaper, magazine or comic) that students have chosen for themselves and is not subject to follow-up work such as comprehension questions or a summary. Krashen (2003) makes the claim that Free voluntary reading 'may be the most powerful educational tool in language education'. It serves to increase literacy and to develop vocabulary. Extensive voluntary reading provides non-native students with large doses of comprehensible input with a low affective filter, and thus is a major factor in their general language acquisition.

Comments
Krashen's research has led many schools to implement in-class reading programmes such as SSR (Sustained Silent Reading). Investigations conducted by the US National Reading Panel (2000) did not find clear evidence that these programmes made students better readers or encouraged them to read more. Some educators (see Klump, 2007) believe that SSR is not the most productive use of instructional time. Krashen's response is that the NRP's research was flawed and that SSR does indeed result in better readers and more reading.

Implications for mainstream teachers
It is desirable that students develop the habit of regular reading in each discipline, even if teachers prefer not to use instructional time to enable this. They may wish, therefore, to assign self-selected reading as occasional homework and have students report back on anything they feel worthy of sharing with the rest of the class. Teachers can collaborate with the librarian to stock the library and the classrooms with interesting materials. Students can be given lists of recommended websites.
Bilingual education

Recent decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number of non-native speakers of English in the classrooms of Great Britain, the USA and other English-speaking countries. Educators in this period have been debating how best to meet the special needs of these students. In broad terms there are two opposing approaches: 1. maximize the learner's exposure to English; 2. provide instruction in the mother tongue as well as in English. Krashen is a strong advocate of the second approach, which finds its implementation in one of the forms of bilingual education.

Comments

Bilingual educational is a highly contentious issue, particularly in the USA. The strong arguments from research that mother-tongue support for non-native English students is beneficial for both their English language and their academic development have not been found convincing by much of the general public. Politicians have seen the issue as a way to gain voter popularity. Indeed, the whole question has become subsumed in volatile side issues such as race, immigration and poverty. The proponents of bilingual education, Krashen included, have been subject to intemperate personal attacks.

Implications for mainstream teachers

The dispute about optimal programme support for ESL students does not have a direct impact on mainstream teachers. However, research in the fields of second language acquisition and bilingual education has taught us that the first language is a very important tool both in acquiring the second language and in learning content/skills in that second language. The major reason for this is that judicious use of the mother-tongue serves to make English input comprehensible.

Whole Language

Krashen is a strong advocate of the whole language approach to the teaching of reading, and has written many articles in support of it. In essence, whole language proponents claim that children learn to read most enjoyably and efficiently by exposure to interesting stories that are made comprehensible to them through pictures and discussions. This is in contrast to structured decoding programmes (usually designated phonics) in which children learn to read by sounding out the various parts of words.

Comments

The whole language/phonics debate has become politicised and increasingly vitriolic. Constant media reports about falling literacy standards have alarmed parents, many of whom vehemently protest if they consider their child's school to have chosen the wrong approach. The issue is further complicated by the involvement of publishing houses which stand to make large profits if school districts can be persuaded to buy their comprehensive sets of phonics-based
materials. Such an entanglement of interests is rarely conducive to making the best pedagogical decisions.

**Implications for mainstream teachers**

While this debate clearly has considerable implications for teachers of young children, it has little or no direct impact on mainstream teachers at upper school level, the intended audience of this web page. Nevertheless, teachers of older students (and parents) may wish to have a little knowledge of such a contentious pedagogical issue.

**Cognitive development**

Krashen (2003) claims that cognitive development, including the acquisition of concepts and facts, is more likely to occur through problem-solving than through deliberate study. It is a confusion of cause and effect to teach facts and thinking skills in order that students may then solve real problems. Instead, it is the case, Krashen says, that learning is the result of working on real problems.

Writing that synthesizes knowledge gained from various sources, incorporates personal insights, and presents these in a structured way is an excellent example of a problem-solving activity that leads to cognitive development.

**Comments**

Krashen's theory of cognitive development is based in the holistic paradigm. This paradigm has at its core the belief that teaching is most effective when it engages students in authentic, complex tasks rather than discrete skill-building. The holistic approach, which became popular in the 1960s, is now held responsible by some for what they claim to be a general decline in educational standards. This reactionary movement is often referred to as Back to Basics.

**Implications for mainstream teachers**

The most important implication is that teachers should seek out relevant, real (or realistic) problems for their students to solve. In other words, problems that interest the students and that naturally entail researching, thinking, discussing, reading and writing or presenting.

**Writing**

Krashen's (1984) early work in this field draws the distinction between writing competence and writing performance. Competence is the largely subconscious, abstract knowledge of what constitutes good prose. Competence is acquired for the most part through reading. Performance, on the other hand, refers to the conscious application of strategies or rules that have been learned and practised. The distinction between competence and performance in writing parallels that between acquisition and learning in second language development.
In his later work Krashen (2003) investigates how writing can contribute to cognitive development. He summarizes research that shows how various writing activities, in particular note-taking and summary writing, are significant aids to learning §§.

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Comments
The important insight from Krashen's work is that neither competence nor performance is alone sufficient in the production of a good piece of writing. Extensive reading, regular writing practice and the acquisition of writing skills and strategies are all necessary to ensure a strong end product.

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Implications for mainstream teachers
Students who take notes in class and make summaries learn more than those who do not. Teachers should therefore consider requiring students to have a notebook and pencil at the ready in every lesson. ESL students can be encouraged to use their own language in noting down information and ideas. Teachers may also wish, from time to time, to have the students write a short paragraph summarizing the essential content of the lesson or section of it. Again, in the case of ESL students this summary could be in the mother tongue.

Since reading is the essential ingredient in the development of writing competence, teachers could encourage or require self-selected reading in their subject area.

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Summary
Krashen's research and writings have inspired an enormous amount of attention over the last three decades. The thousands of research studies, scholarly articles and books based on Krashen's work are testimony to the major contribution he has made to advancing knowledge and understanding in the fields of linguistics and education. Significant numbers of teachers across the world have based their instruction on Krashen's theories, to the benefit of the learners in their classrooms.