

Study on Optimal Input Forms in Second Language Acquisition from the Perspective of Krashen's Input Hypothesis

Yike Zeng

*School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University Jinjiang College, Meishan, China
2195366229@qq.com*

Abstract: In the early 1980s, American linguist Stephen Krashen proposed a series of hypotheses in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), including the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, Natural Order Hypothesis, Monitor Hypothesis, Input Hypothesis, and Affective Filter Hypothesis. Among these, the Input Hypothesis stands as the central and most pivotal component, constituting a cornerstone of theoretical research in SLA. In recent years, Krashen and Beniko Mason have conducted in-depth refinements on the Input Hypothesis, and introduced Story Listening (SL) and Guided Self-Selected Reading (GSSR) as optimal input forms. These innovations provide innovative theoretical frameworks and practical pathways for advancing SLA research and pedagogy. This paper systematically reviews the theoretical underpinnings of the Input Hypothesis through a literature synthesis methodology, elucidating the definitions, implementation mechanisms, and empirical efficacy of optimal input forms. The study concludes that comprehension-based input methods significantly enhance the efficiency of language acquisition.

Keywords: Input hypothesis, Optimal Input Modalities, Story-Listening, Guided Self-Selected Reading, Krashen

1. Introduction

In the late 1970s, American linguist Stephen Krashen proposed a series of hypotheses on second language acquisition (SLA), among which the Input Hypothesis occupies a central position in SLA theory. The core tenet of the Input Hypothesis lies in comprehensible input, defined as language input slightly beyond learners' current proficiency level $i+1$. Krashen further posited that effective language acquisition necessitates four conditions: comprehensibility ($i+1$ principle), interest, abundance, and non-grammatical sequencing of input. In recent years, Krashen and Beniko Mason have advanced research on optimal input forms, conducting extensive empirical studies to validate Story Listening (SL) and Guided Self-Selected Reading (GSSR) as optimal input methods. Their work provides detailed theoretical and pedagogical frameworks for these approaches. This paper employs a literature review methodology to explicate the theoretical foundations of Krashen's Input Hypothesis and the operationalization of optimal input forms. By doing so, it offers valuable insights for SLA research and contributes to the advancement of the field.

2. Literature review

Krashen's Input Hypothesis posits that learners can transform input into acquisition only when exposed to comprehensible linguistic input. The optimal approach to ensuring second language acquisition lies in providing optimal input, which must inherently possess four defining characteristics. First, the input must be comprehensible and fall within the $i+1$ range. Here, i represents the learners' current linguistic competence, while 1 denotes the gap between the learners' present state and the subsequent developmental stage. In other words, $i+1$ signifies the potential for language development. This does not necessitate mastery of every lexical item or comprehension of every component within the input. Rather, optimal input occurs when the majority of the input is understood, even if partial ambiguities persist. Second, the input must be both relevant and engaging. The greater the relevance and intrinsic interest of the input, the more effectively learners acquire language subconsciously. Compelling input may even induce learners to momentarily disregard the foreign language medium of communication. Third, the input must be provided in sufficient quantity. Optimal input entails linguistically rich content that scaffolds learners' comprehension and facilitates language internalization. Finally, the input should not be systematically organized according to a grammatical syllabus. Language acquisition naturally emerges in communicative contexts, thereby eliminating the need for rigid adherence to predetermined grammatical sequences. There is no pedagogical justification for enforcing learners' use of specific grammatical forms, as abundant input inherently contains both acquired structures and new linguistic features that learners are developmentally prepared to assimilate [1].

Beniko Mason and Krashen have experimentally demonstrated that story fulfills these four conditions [2]. Since language input encompasses both listening and reading, the optimal sequence for linguistic input proceeds from SL to GSSR [3].

SL refers to an instructional approach where teachers select compelling, time-tested stories tailored to learners' proficiency levels, while employing Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation (CAS) to clarify potentially incomprehensible elements [4]. Distinct from traditional mnemonic methods that prioritize vocabulary or grammar acquisition through artificial story construction and drills, SL emphasizes authentic narrative comprehension and enjoyment. Crucially, all lexical items in SL are contextually embedded within meaningful stories, which significantly enhances learner motivation and facilitates subconscious language acquisition through sustained engagement with comprehensible input.

The distinction between CAS) and Form-Focused Supplementation (FFS) is critical, as SL inherently employs CAS. Traditional language classrooms predominantly utilize FFS—a method aligned with the Skill-Building Hypothesis that emphasizes conscious learning through grammar rule memorization and vocabulary drills. FFS prioritizes intentional knowledge accumulation via mandatory repetitive exercises, output practice, and error correction, often inducing high affective filters (e.g., anxiety) in learners by overtly foregrounding linguistic forms. In FFS, vocabulary and grammar are deliberately highlighted to facilitate deliberate mastery, reflecting a goal-oriented instructional paradigm. Conversely, CAS operates as a subconscious acquisition mechanism, enriching input through multimodal elaboration (e.g., visual aids, gestures, L1/L2 synonym scaffolding) to enhance engagement and comprehensibility. Unlike FFS, CAS does not demand immediate retention or forced production of target elements. Instead, it fosters gradual internalization by ensuring input is intrinsically compelling and cognitively accessible, aligning with Krashen's principles of low-anxiety, meaning-driven acquisition [5].

For novice learners lacking graded reading experience, SL serves as an optimal initial input modality, transitioning to integrated reading engagement at developmental milestones, as SL naturally precedes GSSR in pedagogical sequences. While exposure to compelling, comprehensible

stories through SL prepares learners for literacy development, a critical distinction lies in SL's pan-proficiency applicability versus GSSR's reliance on leveled materials. Notably, self-selected reading enhances both linguistic accuracy and fluency. Experimental studies by Krashen and Mason substantiate SSR's efficacy for demotivated learners, demonstrating superiority over traditional methods in literacy development, reading speed acceleration, and writing proficiency enhancement, with particular effectiveness observed among low-proficiency students [6].

Beniko Mason has recently expanded the SSR framework by introducing Guided SSR (GSSR) as a scaffolded preparatory stage. This approach prioritizes two key elements including strategic text curation tailored to learners' proficiency and interests, and habitual engagement through structured routines. Teachers act not merely as supervisors but as facilitators, actively guiding students to compelling materials that align with their personal and cognitive profiles. The goal is to create immersive reading experiences where second language acquisition occurs subconsciously, allowing learners to absorb linguistic patterns naturally rather than through deliberate study [7].

In GSSR instruction, educators must strategically calibrate text selection to learners' L2 proficiency and reading speed, adhering to lexically tiered thresholds. For novice readers (those with reading speeds below 60 words per minute [wpm]), texts should maintain lexical thresholds not exceeding 700 words, while advanced learners demonstrating accelerated decoding rates require higher-level texts with increased lexical density and conceptual complexity. Empirical evidence confirms that systematic GSSR implementation enhances reading efficiency and motivational engagement, necessitating progressive text complexity escalation aligned with developmental milestones. Concurrently, instructors may integrate output-oriented reinforcement by requiring learners to produce written story synopses in the target language during advanced stages, thereby bridging receptive and productive competence through contextually embedded practice.

Krashen and Mason propose that Narrow Reading—focusing on works by a single author or extensive content within a specialized topic of interest—is more effective for second language acquisition than reading diverse, unrelated texts. This approach utilizes repeated exposure to consistent language patterns and vocabulary within a cohesive context, which strengthens comprehension and retention. The same principle applies to Narrow Listening, where learners engage deeply with audio materials centered on specific themes or sources, fostering natural language acquisition through focused, meaningful input [8]. The mastery of language structures and vocabulary develops through repeated exposure to comprehensible input—the more frequently learners encounter understandable content, the better they internalize these elements. Narrow Reading effectively supports this process by focusing on texts within a specific theme or by a single author, which helps learners build up contextual knowledge (i.e., background information about the topic and the linguistic patterns employed). Additionally, Narrow Reading can boost motivation, as learners are naturally drawn to topics they enjoy and styles they find familiar, making the process more enjoyable and sustainable over time [9].

3. Empirical studies on comprehensible input-based pedagogy in second language acquisition

3.1. Experiment by Smith, Mason, and Krashen

Ken Smith, Beniko Mason, and Stephen Krashen conducted an experiment with 11 intermediate English learners from five countries to demonstrate how SL and GSSR foster substantial language acquisition when optimal input is provided [10]. These students, who had no prior exposure to input-focused methodologies, listened to two 30-40 minute stories per session, followed by teacher-guided selection of graded readers for silent reading. Participants recorded reading duration, page counts,

and titles. A cloze test was administered to measure their focus on textual input from SL and GSSR, confirming the methods' effectiveness in facilitating subconscious language development.

Table 1: Efficiency: gains per hour

	Total Read	Total Input
Total	223.3	407.8
Mean	20.3	37.1
Gains/Hour	0.24	0.13

As demonstrated in Table 1, the experimental results demonstrated a reading gain efficiency of 0.24 per hour, further validating that SL and GSSR significantly enhance second language acquisition when implemented as optimal input methods.

3.2. Experiment by Mason

This study compared the effectiveness of form-based instruction against comprehensible input methods for second language acquisition. Participants included 40 university students divided into two groups including 16 English majors and 24 Health Science majors. All students participated in combined SL and GSSR sessions. English majors received additional training through Self-Access Programmed Learning—a structured method using textbooks and audio tapes to develop listening, speaking, pronunciation, writing, and reading skills, with teacher intervention only when issues arose [11]. A cloze test measured learning outcomes, revealing key insights about optimal pedagogical approaches for different learner profiles.

3.3. Results

Table 2: Cloze test results [11]

	Pre-test	Post-test	gain	Efficiency
English Majors	22.4(8.8)	29.4(11.7)	7(6.13)	0.06(7/126h)
Health Science Major	14.9(5.3)	19.3(7.0)	4.4(4.91)	0.24(4.4/18h)
Effect Size	1.1	1.12		

* mean scores; standard deviation in parentheses

The English majors, after 126 hours of instruction (10.5 hours/week $\times$ 12 weeks), achieved a modest gain of 7 points on the cloze test—equivalent to 0.06 points per instructional hour according to table 2. In striking contrast, Health Science students attained 4.4 points with only 18 hours of exposure, demonstrating a significantly higher hourly gain rate of 0.24 points. This fourfold difference in efficiency highlights how learner background and instructional intensity interact with input-based methodologies.

Table 3: Percentage of error-free phrases [11]

	Pre-test	Post-test	gain	Efficiency
English Major	47% (9.8/20.9)	55% (28.2/51.6)	8%	0.06(8/126)
Health Science Major	35% (6.2/17.6)	40% (13/32.9)	5%	0.28(5/18)

The results revealed striking efficiency disparities. Health Science majors demonstrated three to four times higher hourly growth rates in vocabulary and phrase acquisition compared to English majors, as shown in table 3. Notably, students receiving just 1 hour per week of comprehensible input-based instruction progressed several times faster than peers who received 6 hours of traditional teaching methods in addition to comprehensible input. These findings conclusively demonstrate the superior efficacy of comprehensible input-based pedagogy over conventional instructional approaches in driving second language development.

4. Conclusion

This study assesses Krashen's Input Hypothesis, specifically examining SL and GSSR as optimal input approaches for second language acquisition. Findings demonstrate that comprehension-based methods (e.g., SL and GSSR) significantly enhance language learning efficiency, particularly through Narrow Reading and Narrow Listening strategies, which systematically strengthen linguistic competence. Empirical case studies further corroborate their effectiveness in improving reading fluency and accuracy. While demonstrating the efficacy of optimized input approaches, the research acknowledges limitations including limited generalizability due to small sample sizes and brief intervention durations, insufficient exploration of input-output synergies, partial analysis of affective filter mechanisms, and absence of personalized assessment tools. Future directions propose cross-cultural sample expansion, longitudinal implementations, integration of output activities with affective studies, and development of NLP-powered real-time feedback systems. These approaches aim to advance personalized acquisition pathways for second language acquisition.

References

- [1] Stephen-D-Krashen (2019) *optimal input university_of_isfahan_dec_2019.pdf*
- [2] Stephen Krashen, Beniko Mason. (2020) *The Optimal Input Hypothesis: Not All Comprehensible Input is of Equal Value. The optimal input hypothesis (1)*
- [3] Beniko, M. (2020) *Story Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading. In: JALT2020 ONLINE: COMMUNITIES of TEACHERS and LEARNERS. 21-22.*
- [4] Stephen D. Krashen & Beniko Mason. (2022) *Foundations for Story-Listening: Foundations for Story-Listening-Some Basics.*
- [5] Stephen Krashen, Beniko Mason, Ken Smith. (2018) *Some New Terminology: Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation and Form-Focusing Supplementation. New Terminology 2018. LLT*
- [6] Stephen Krashen. (2018) *Interview. 2019 LLT vol 8, number 1, issue 16*
- [7] Beniko Mason. (2019) *Guided SSR before Self-Selected Reading. GSSR before SSR (2019)*
- [8] Stephen-Krashen.(1996) *The Case for Narrow Listening. Pergamon.Vol.24. No.1. 97-100*
- [9] Stephen-Krashen.(2004) *The Case for Narrow Reading. Language Magazine 3(5):17-19*
- [10] Smith, K., Mason, B., & Krashen, S. (2021). *Story-listening and guided self-selected reading: Short-term results from Indonesia. Language Issues, 1(3), 1-14.*
- [11] Mason, B. (2007). *The efficiency of self-selected reading and hearing stories on adult second language acquisition. In Selected papers from the sixteenth International Symposium on English Teaching (pp. 630-633).*