

Session 5: The Input Hypothesis

1. Overview of Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis

Stephen Krashen, a linguist and educational researcher, introduced his **Input Hypothesis** as part of his broader theory of second language acquisition (SLA). His hypothesis fundamentally shifts the focus from output (speaking and writing) to input (listening and reading) as the core mechanism for acquiring language.

The Input Hypothesis argues that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to **comprehensible input**. This means that the language they encounter is mostly understandable, but slightly more advanced than their current proficiency level. Krashen labeled this concept as $i + 1$, where “i” represents the learner's current level, and “+1” symbolizes the next level of challenge or new language structures they are ready to acquire.

According to Krashen:

- Language is **acquired**, not learned. While learning is a conscious process focused on grammar rules and practice, acquisition happens subconsciously when the learner is immersed in meaningful communication.
- Exposure to **comprehensible input** is essential for language acquisition. The learner must receive input that contains elements just beyond their current understanding.
- Speaking and writing emerge as natural consequences of comprehensible input, rather than through forced production exercises.

Krashen's theory includes five hypotheses, but the **Input Hypothesis** is central to explaining how learners acquire languages naturally and effectively.

Core Elements of the Input Hypothesis

1. **Acquisition vs. Learning:** Acquisition happens through meaningful interaction in the target language, while learning is a conscious process involving grammar instruction.
2. **$i + 1$:** Input should be slightly above the learner's current level to challenge and push them toward new knowledge.
3. **Natural Order:** Language acquisition follows a predictable order, with certain structures being acquired before others.
4. **Silent Period:** Learners should not be forced to speak until they are ready. During this period, they are absorbing and processing input, which will eventually lead to spontaneous output.
5. **Affective Filter Hypothesis:** Factors like anxiety, motivation, and confidence impact language acquisition. A low-anxiety, supportive environment allows for more effective learning.

2. Importance of Comprehensible Input

Comprehensible input is the foundation of Krashen's Input Hypothesis. It refers to language that learners can understand with little effort, even if it includes some unfamiliar elements. The importance of this kind of input lies in its ability to expose learners to new vocabulary, grammatical structures, and linguistic patterns in a way that is both challenging and accessible.

Krashen argues that without comprehensible input, meaningful language acquisition is impossible. When learners are consistently exposed to input that is slightly beyond their current level of comprehension ($i + 1$), they are naturally

stretched to make sense of the new information, incorporating it into their existing language repertoire.

Why is Comprehensible Input Critical?

1. **Implicit Learning:** Comprehensible input allows learners to pick up new language structures and vocabulary subconsciously, through exposure and context, rather than explicit instruction. This is crucial for developing fluency.
2. **Reduction of Anxiety:** By providing input that is understandable, learners feel more confident and less anxious about language acquisition. The **affective filter** is lowered, which promotes better learning.
3. **Scaffolded Learning:** Comprehensible input acts as a scaffold, offering the right amount of support and challenge. This makes the learning process more efficient and allows for more rapid progress in language proficiency.

Example: A student listening to a simplified version of a news broadcast in the target language, with key vocabulary words illustrated through visuals or context clues, is engaging with comprehensible input. Even if some words or phrases are unfamiliar, the learner can infer meaning from the broader context.

3. Classroom Implications with Practical Examples

Krashen's Input Hypothesis has significant implications for classroom teaching. Rather than emphasizing grammar drills or forced speaking exercises, instructors should focus on providing learners with rich, meaningful, and comprehensible input. Additionally, reducing anxiety in the classroom and allowing students to experience a **silent period** are key factors in supporting natural language acquisition.

Classroom Implications

1. **Focus on Listening and Reading First:** The Input Hypothesis suggests that students should first be exposed to abundant listening and reading activities. These should contain input that is slightly beyond the learner's current level of understanding.
 - **Example Activity: Storytelling with Visual Cues**
 - The teacher tells a story using simple language and visual aids (pictures or gestures) to support comprehension.
 - **Objective:** Students understand the narrative without feeling pressured to produce language immediately.
 - **Classroom Impact:** This allows learners to process the input at their own pace, absorbing new vocabulary and structures naturally.
2. **Use of Graded Readers:** Graded readers are books that have been simplified to match different proficiency levels. These books provide comprehensible input by using language that is slightly more advanced than the learner's current level.
 - **Example Activity: Reading a Graded Reader Together**
 - The class reads a simplified novel or story aloud, with the teacher stopping periodically to explain new words or concepts.
 - **Objective:** Gradual exposure to more complex language structures in a supportive environment.
 - **Classroom Impact:** This ensures that learners are exposed to new linguistic elements ($i + 1$) without becoming overwhelmed.
3. **Emphasis on a Low-Anxiety Environment:** Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis emphasizes the importance of reducing stress and anxiety in the

classroom. When learners feel anxious, their ability to acquire language is diminished.

- **Example Activity: Encouraging Silent Observation**

- During the first few weeks of class, allow beginners to listen and observe without the expectation to speak. Instead, they can respond to questions non-verbally (through gestures or written answers).
- **Objective:** To give learners time to absorb input without the pressure to produce language.
- **Classroom Impact:** Reducing performance pressure encourages students to take risks in language learning when they feel ready.

4. **Delayed Speech and Writing:** According to Krashen, speaking and writing should come naturally after learners have had enough exposure to comprehensible input. Forcing learners to speak prematurely can increase anxiety and hinder progress.

- **Example Activity: Partner Listening Exercises**

- Pair students together and give one student a task that involves listening to their partner speak for several minutes. The listener's task is to comprehend and summarize what their partner said.
- **Objective:** Focus on comprehension without the pressure to immediately respond verbally.
- **Classroom Impact:** Encouraging listening comprehension before verbal output leads to more confident and accurate speaking when the time comes.

5. **Comprehensible Input Through Multimedia:** Incorporating audio-visual materials, such as videos, podcasts, and interactive simulations, can provide a rich source of comprehensible input. These materials should be slightly above the learners' level ($i + 1$) and include plenty of visual aids to assist comprehension.

- **Example Activity: Video Watching with Subtitles**

- Play a video in the target language with simplified subtitles. After watching, students discuss the content in small groups or complete a comprehension quiz.
- **Objective:** To expose students to natural language input in context.
- **Classroom Impact:** Visual support (subtitles) makes the input comprehensible while still challenging students to engage with new language elements.

6. **Teacher Talk as a Source of Input:** Teachers themselves are an important source of comprehensible input. By adjusting their speech to suit the proficiency level of their students (i.e., using simpler structures or more repetition), they can provide a constant stream of input that is understandable yet challenging.

- **Example Activity: Teacher-Modeled Conversations**

- The teacher engages in a role-play with another student, using slightly advanced language but providing enough context for learners to follow.
- **Objective:** Provide a model of natural language use for students to emulate in their own conversations.

- **Classroom Impact:** Learners get the chance to hear language in context without feeling pressured to perform themselves until they are ready.

4. Conclusion: The Power of Input in Language Learning

Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis fundamentally reorients the way language teaching is approached. By focusing on providing comprehensible input in a low-stress environment, and by delaying the emphasis on production (speaking/writing), teachers can create conditions that mirror natural language acquisition. This method allows learners to absorb new structures and vocabulary subconsciously, at a pace that matches their individual readiness.

Ultimately, the key takeaway from Krashen's Input Hypothesis is that **input** should be at the heart of language instruction. Whether through reading, listening, or observing, learners need to engage with comprehensible and compelling language. When paired with thoughtful scaffolding and supportive teaching practices, this approach leads to the kind of deep and lasting language acquisition that is essential for fluency.

10 Questions Based on the Content

1. What is the main difference between **language acquisition** and **language learning**, according to Krashen?
2. Define **i + 1** in the context of Krashen's Input Hypothesis.
3. Why is comprehensible input essential for second language acquisition?
4. Explain the role of the **silent period** in language learning.
5. How does Krashen's **Affective Filter Hypothesis** relate to classroom anxiety?

6. Provide an example of a classroom activity that utilizes **graded readers** to provide comprehensible input.
7. What are some strategies teachers can use to lower the **affective filter** in their classrooms?
8. How can multimedia tools (e.g., videos, podcasts) be used to provide comprehensible input in a language classroom?
9. Describe how teachers can adjust their teacher talk to serve the needs of different proficiency levels in the classroom while ensuring that the input remains comprehensible and engaging for all students.
10. How can teachers assess whether the input provided in their lessons is appropriately leveled for their students?