The Promise of "Optimal Input"

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For the last 40+ years, teachers have been advised to avoid following one specific methodology and use techniques and activities from different language teaching approaches and methodologies. This approach is called the "Eclectic Approach," and almost all the modern course books support mixing methodologies. (British Council). [1] After 40+ years, however, the Eclectic Approach has not been shown to be the most effective method. There have been some objections against using only an acquisition approach. In this paper, we will explain that they are no longer valid objections when optimal input methods by way of Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading are used in the classrooms. It is possible that other methods exist, which also provides optimal input that produces results as strong as SL/GSSR that are convenient and easy to install in the classroom. This should be investigated, and until this is done, SL/GSSR is our best bet. It is clearly time to seriously consider the idea of a 100% acquisition-based program.

For the last 40+ years, teachers have been advised to avoid following one specific methodology and use techniques and activities from different language teaching approaches and methodologies. This approach is called the "Eclectic Approach," and almost all the modern course books support mixing methodologies. (British Council). [1]

After 40+ years, however, the Eclectic Approach has not been shown to be the most effective method. Studies revealed that the more eclectic teaching included meaningful comprehension-based activities, the better the results (e.g., Isik, 2000). In fact, research done over the last 30 years has shown that "pure" (not mixed) optimal input is not only effective, but also efficient for language development (e.g., Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen, 2004a, 2011; Mason & Krashen, 1997, 2004; Mason, 2013, 2018; Smith, 2006). Optimal input (Krashen & Mason, 2020) is the cause of effective and efficient (optimal) language acquisition in the limited amount of time we have available to us in schools.

Although optimal input instruction is a good answer, most schools still use the eclectic approach for different reasons, and do not fully exploit the use of the acquisition approach. One popular reason is that the students must take exams and it is thought that the acquisition approach does not prepare students for them. Other reasons given are that students prefer the traditional test preparation course, and that the acquisition approach is slow. These are exactly the same reasons that were given 40+ years ago, discussed below. In this paper, we will explain that these objections are no longer valid and that the acquisition approach using optimal input is a promising answer.

The six objections against fully embracing the acquisition-based approach only were:

1. We don't have the materials
2. "Trivialization"
3. The "just talk" fallacy
4. Personnel problems
5. Students' expectations
6. "It takes too long"
   (Krashen, 1985; pages 54-58)

RESPONSES TO THE OBJECTIONS

1. "MATERIALS"

When we free ourselves from believing that we must teach according to a grammar-based syllabus, or that we must teach the first basic 2,000 high- frequency words first, and when we understand that language acquisition emerges in a predictable order when students receive rich compelling language input that they understand and enjoy, we can use stories and books for materials instead of traditional textbooks.

There are ways to use stories and books as materials, which are fully consistent with the five hypotheses of Comprehension Theory (Krashen, 1985, 2003). The two approaches that have the greatest promise are Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading (Mason & Pendergst, 1997; Mason, 2014, 2015, 2019; Krashen & Mason, 2020; Mason & Krashen, 2020). Both ways of teaching appear to provide "Optimal input." The results of several studies show that they are not only effective; but also efficient for developing listening and reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and writing, as measured by teacher-made tests and standardized tests (Krashen & Mason, 2015; Mason, Krashen, 2017, Mason, 2013, 2018).

2. "TRIVIALIZATION"

Stories and books are not trivial

When input-based teaching consisted primarily of TPR, games, content-related activities, plays, and songs, the critics were right when they complained that the input was trivial, that is, it did not include enough language, enough variety of language, and was not interesting enough, let alone "compelling."

Stories and books, however, are not trivial; they can provide students with input that is rich, comprehensible, and compelling. There is good evidence showing that reading is the most efficient way to provide comprehensible input for vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2014).

Hsieh, Wang and Lee (2011) reported that 65 picture books that were used for read-aloud to elementary school children in Taiwan contained three times as many words as textbooks used at this level. These children began to read books in the "Marvin Redpost" series (3rd-grade reading level) [2] on their own towards the end of their fourth year at the language school where Wang taught.

Walter (2020) reported that the words that students encountered in 50 Story-Listening lessons given to beginning high school French as a foreign language students were much richer in quality and more abundant in quantity than the words in the textbooks used during the same length of school time.

Stories are written in correct grammar, and they contain a wide variety of vocabulary, including many low-frequency words and academic words (McQuillan, 2019). When students hear stories and read books that they enjoy and understand, they subconsciously acquire many words necessary to go on to the next level. When stories are not just read to the students, but are delivered by a teacher who knows what her students understand and do not understand, students will encounter just the right amount of "i+1" in both the text and the teachers' spoken language.

3. IT IS NOT "JUST TALK"

Story-Listening Instruction is not Storytelling

When stories are told to students in the *Story-Listening Way*, it is not "Just talking." Story-Listening (Mason & Krashen, 2004; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009; Mason & Krashen, 2018; Clarke, 2019; Mason, Smith, & Krashen, 2020) is more than just telling a story. It uses written texts of fairy/folk tales as materials and uses a

strategy called the Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation (Krashen, 1982; Krashen, Mason, & Smith, 2018) in order to make incomprehensible input comprehensible.

The syllabus is flexibly adjusted by the teacher to accept the students' natural development and interests. The teacher, however, is the one who decides what story to use and what words to use to tell the story. The teacher takes time to explain the content of the story using words that the teacher thinks that the students already know. The teacher knows the problems that the students have with comprehension and knows how to make the stories comprehensible.

Guided Self-Selected Reading is not Extensive Reading

Books are not trivial either, even when the books are pedagogical readers graded according to vocabulary level. Because the grading is not 100% precise, and because the books are on different topics, the graded readers contain some difficult words even when they are labeled as starter level readers.

For example, in one of the 200-headword starter level Penguin graded readers, "Manuscript" is used in the first page in "The Big Bag Mistake," and "Ungrateful" is used in the 300-headword starter level MacMillan graded reader, "Alissa." "Ungrateful" is at the 3rd 1,000-word level word, and "Manuscript" is at the 4th 1,000-word level word.

In Guided Self-Selected Reading, students are guided to appropriate books by an experienced teacher with extensive knowledge about the readers. The books that the teacher provides to the students include not only graded readers, but also authentic books that are written for young native speaker readers (McQuillan, 2016). [2]

Unlike Extensive Reading, students are not asked to read widely for general education in a GSSR program, but they are advised to read narrowly (Krashen, 2004b). Students are not taken to the library and are totally on their own. They are not advised to start reading graded readers according to their scores on the placement tests. Students are guided: 1) To the books that they can read easily; 2) To appropriate level books; and 3) To the amount of reading needed in order to reach their goal within the limited time in school.

Students are required to keep a reading log for individual guidance; but there are no comprehension questions (Krashen & Mason, 2019), or vocabulary exercises, and there is no summary writing in English (in the case of the EFL situation), and no tests after reading a book (Mason, 2015). Guided Self-Selected Reading does not combine reading with conscious learning or with Intensive Reading. In GSSR, reading alone is enough. (Krashen, 2009; McQuillan, 2019; Mason, 2019).

4. "NO PERSONNEL PROBLEMS"

Anyone with some training can do it.

Both Story-Listening (SL) and Guided-Self-Selected Reading (GSSR) methods are not difficult to learn and can be used by anyone, even by those without teaching certificates or college degrees. The methods use common sense. They involve techniques that we have used from the beginning of human history.

5. STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS

Orientation and positive experiences change their perspective

A frequently heard opposition to the use of acquisition-based methods is that teachers believe that students prefer conscious learning. Our experience is that when students experience that listening to stories and reading books are much easier and more fun and it leads to acquiring the language and better performance on standardized tests, they prefer acquisition-based methods. To help them understand what these methods are, we first give them an orientation and then have them experience language acquisition using the methods.

Orientation sessions cover these topics:
1) the theory,
2) the methods,
3) the positive research evidence,
4) the goal of the program,
5) how students are guided to reach the goal,
6) what students are expected to do, and
7) how students will be evaluated.

After they receive the above orientation, they experience language acquisition using SL and GSSR. Once they experience how easy and pleasant this acquisition-based instruction is, they start having hope, even if they are still skeptical about an Input-Only approach.

When students experience immediate success with SL and GSSR, they are motivated to continue. Motivation does not come from understanding the theory and positive research evidence but comes from successful personal experience with the methods.

Once students experience how pleasant hearing stories and reading books are, they prefer this to studying grammar, memorizing vocabulary, doing worksheets, taking tests, and being corrected and evaluated. What's more, when they see that they are

making significant gains on standardized tests often after only one semester or, at most, a year (Mason, 2013, Mason & Krashen, 2019), gains that they had not experienced before with the hard work of using the traditional approach, they are convinced of the value of these methods.

6. EFFICIENCY

Both time and cost-efficient

Listening to comprehensible and highly engaging stories is not only more pleasant, but it is also more efficient for vocabulary acquisition. The results of several studies show that acquisition of vocabulary from Story-Listening proceeds at a faster rate than memorizing words. We have also found that adding traditional post-listening instruction on vocabulary resulted in more words mastered; but was not as efficient in terms of words retained per minute. The time is better spent in listening to and reading stories (Mason and Krashen, 2004; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009; Mason & Krashen, 2018; Clarke, 2019; Mason, Smith, & Krashen, 2020).

- Constantino (1995) reported that her ESL students who read during the summer passed the TOEFL requirement, but that one who studied for the test did not.
- In Mason (2006), Japanese college students who stayed in Japan and read books from the university library gained the same number of points per week on the TOEFL as international students who were in an Intensive English Program at a university campus in the USA.
- A middle-aged Japanese man who read about 6,500 pages gained 180 points on the TOEIC mostly from mostly reading alone (Mason 2011).
- A student who read 1700 pages in one-semester reading books that she checked out from the university library gained 85 points on the TOEIC during that semester while she gained only five points after spending 16- months in Canada staying with a host family and taking college classes (Mason & Krashen, 2019). Reading alone was unbelievably efficient.

CONCLUSION

When we use stories and books as materials in the way of Story-Listening and GSSR, the problems we listed earlier disappear. When the input is interesting and comprehensible, students listen and read. When the input is abundant and it is rich, that is, when it contains language that adds depth and interest to the story and helps make unfamiliar language more comprehensible, it helps provide i+1 for everyone in the class. Research has shown that the use of stories and books as done in Story-

Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading are not only effective but also time-efficient for language acquisition.

The usual objections to an input-only approach have been answered. It is clearly time to seriously consider the idea of a 100% acquisition-based program.

Notes:
(1) British Council: https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/eclectic-approach
(2) Marvign Redpost: https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/books/marvin-redpost-1-kidnapped-at-birth-by-louis-sachar/ For example: #1 Kidnapped at Birth is at **Accelerated Reader Level:** 2.8 (https://www.akjeducation.com/marvin-redpost-1-kidnapped-at-birth-9780679819462)
(3) https://www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages

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