

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION.

Stephen Krashen. Prentice Hall International. 1989. 146 pp. Price not indicated. -- Tom Hayes

Pundits in the hard sciences, such as Carl Sagan, Stephen J. Gould, and Stephen Hawkins, often popularize their own theories, yet they risk little of their professional status if their theories are challenged. Whether they choose to respond to the challenge, showing that various alleged anomalies are not anomalies at all, or whether they accept the anomalies and then constrain, modify, or even expand the theory, they do so within generally accepted strictures for establishing, defending, and evaluating *theory*, not their own personal reputations.

Life is quite different in the social and the behavioral sciences, economics is a good example, where theories are often not predictive, are often unverifiable, and where the winds of popular and professional acceptance and interest blow fast and loose, often with little notice of anomalous data or gaping holes in the intellectual fabric of the theory. Social science theories also appear more directly tied to the careers and personal appeal and influence of individual researchers, who become personally and economically tied to pursuing their own ideas, no matter how far afield they may lead, no matter how suspect their views.

Stephen Krashen is a case in point among linguists. His theory of second language acquisition virtually created the field, and the acquisition/learning distinction has become a point of reference for thousands of teachers, researchers, and journals such as *The TESOL Quarterly*. His considerable writing and speaking skills have made his theory accessible to teachers who ordinarily do not have the time to pursue theoretical issues, and he has been accepted as a guru, with the misunderstanding that that entails, by a generation of ESL/EFL instructors and researchers.

Other researchers have seriously questioned the usefulness of Krashen's theory. Krashen has yet to respond. Therefore it is distressing to find that Krashen has allowed Prentice Hall to reprint a 1985 collection of 8 of his essays (not articles), distressing because (1) we expect more from a major publisher, and (2) what we need now from Krashen is a direct, open, and definitive reply to his detractors, such as Kevin Gregg, who have argued that his theory of second language acquisition is a failure.

Instead, we have a reprint with appalling weaknesses, many due to the publisher: the essays are five, six, and seven years old, they are repetitious, much of the material has appeared in more complete form in Krashen's other works, Prentice Hall has not edited the articles, edited the bibliography, added an index, or up-dated the introduction.

Still, Krashen makes three points which may be of interest to experienced teachers who have not kept up with his work since 1985. In one of two excellent chapters in the collection Krashen comes squarely down on the side of bilingual education for children, arguing that

bilingual programs are effective if students receive core subject matter teaching in their first language along with comprehensible input in English.

The second point, one that Krashen makes several times, is that teaching grammar in the target language is an excellent source of comprehensible input and can easily lead to acquisition. Krashen writes, "There are several reasons to include the study of grammar and a grammar text in a Natural Approach type course.....I have suggested that the grammar component be fairly substantial for college students, somewhat more modest for high school students, less still for junior high school, nonexistent for elementary school, and optional for adult education."

Krashen has supported the teaching of grammar in this admittedly limited sense throughout his career, yet it has become commonly accepted fact, or folklore, that he actively denounces the teaching of grammar. Both Luppescu and Folse seemed to believe this when they feuded in last year's *The Language Teacher*, and many EFL/EFL teachers do not teach grammar, will not teach grammar, and have actually avoided learning grammatical rules of English, because they believe Krashen has shown that grammar teaching is ineffective.

Given Krashen's actual view, this is a sorry situation, especially as the vast majority of native-speaker English teachers in Japan conduct their classes exclusively in English. Adding grammar teaching to their routine would not radically alter their teaching approach, and would reinforce the comprehensible input they receive from the instruction by providing a greater cognitive awareness of the structure of the language.

Krashen's third point is the most interesting and the most directly related to his current interests. Krashen argues that reading, especially reading for pleasure, is a major help in the development of children's language skills. Krashen builds his case based on the superior language performance of children who have taken part in sustained silent reading programs, "self-selected" reading programs, who are surrounded by or have easy access to books, who read for pleasure, and who are read aloud to by their parents. Krashen offers both a weak and a strong conclusion, the weaker that reading exposure is a major help in language skill development, the stronger that it is "the primary means of developing language skills." Krashen's conclusion, if verifiable, could have an enormous impact on the structure of our language classes in Japan.

In this and the following chapter, "Further Inquiries", Krashen has accumulated an impressive amount of research, obviously assimilated it, presented it lucidly, and has not given in to his tendency to explain all in terms of his theory, or to make his theory, which he presents as the theory of language acquisition, the core of the chapter. (Repetition is a major weakness of this collection. There are seven separate explanations of his basic theory!)

Except for these three chapters, the rest of this collection is worthwhile only if you missed Krashen's heyday, or if you've had little or no ESL training and want some solid background on Krashen. The chapters either present Krashen's theory in different guises or, like the chapter "Immersion: Why it works and what it has taught us", have been dealt with in greater detail in Krashen's earlier work.

In chapter one, "Language Acquisition Theory and Materials Development", Krashen presents his ideas about language acquisition. In "Core and Supplementary Activities in Language Teaching", Krashen distinguishes between *core* activities, or interesting discussions, tasks, and games, which provide comprehensible input, and *supplementary* activities, such as simplification, providing background information, and relaxation techniques, which aid comprehension. The distinction is trivial.

Chapter 3, "The Din in the Head, Input, and the Language Acquisition Device," was included in the book at the request of Krashen's mother, "who.....told [him] that it is the most readable of all the essays" he has written. This is a curious confession for Krashen to make, as a good 20% of the essay is a direct quote from Elizabeth Barber's first person account of a language "din" which occurred in her head after lengthy exposure to the Russian language. Barber describes her din as "words, sounds, intonations, phrases, all swimming about in the voices of the people I talked with." Barber did not always understand the words she heard in her head, yet Krashen suggests that the din is caused by the triggering of the language acquisition device by comprehensible input. He also suggests that the typical language class is not long enough to stimulate the LAD.

The relationship between second language acquisition theory and classroom practice is explored in chapter 4, "Second Language Acquisition Theory and the Preparation of Teachers: Toward a Rationale," a revision of Krashen's Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics paper from 1983. Krashen discusses the danger of basing language teaching on grammatical theory, briefly discusses the general need for theory in the profession, and claims that students acquire language best when his theory is applied to the second language classroom. There is now little or no consensus over this claim, and whether any theory of language acquisition, for L1 or L2, can serve as the basis for a theory of language teaching, has been seriously questioned (Yalden, forthcoming).

In Chapter 5, "Immersion: Why It Works and What It Has Taught Us", Krashen makes the very useful observation that traditional communicative language courses, and this would include many of Japan's conversation courses, are not able to push students beyond the intermediate level, and certainly do not prepare students to function in the real world. Subject matter teaching in the target language, however, may partially prepare students to operate at this level. See Brinton, Snow, and Wesche 1989 for a general overview, plus a detailed description of the Canadian immersion program described by Krashen.

It would have been so easy for Prentice Hall to put together several useful volumes on Krashen. Apparently another publisher is preparing a volume of reactions to Krashen. I would also like to see a history of Krashen's ideas. How he was able to create and dominate the field for so long would be good reading, as would a collection of essays from teachers who were influenced by his work. What are teachers experienced with Krashen's approaches saying about him now? How are his ideas being put to use in South America, Africa, or conversation classes in Japan? Whether these books will be written is, of course, uncertain. That there is little need for this loose collection of minor essays is a certainty.