

# The Comprehensible Input Theory in Second Language Acquisition: Origin, Development and Evaluation

Shangyun Chen\*

Jiangtai Global Assistance Service Co., Ltd., Beijing, 100000, China

\*Corresponding author: Shangyun Chen, 1767453685@qq.com

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**Abstract:** Krashen's Comprehensible Input (i+1) Hypothesis is the core of his language acquisition theory, which originated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, aiming to explain the process of second language acquisition. This theory is based on previous language acquisition research and absorbs relevant theories from psychology and pedagogy, as well as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Chomsky's linguistic theory. Krashen's theory emphasizes that language acquisition is a natural and subconscious process and highlights the importance of language input. The theory is still applied today; scholars have put forward new insights based on Krashen's theory, with both consistencies and contradictions. It has not only changed educational practitioners' practices in language teaching and curriculum design but also provided an important theoretical tool for understanding the complex process of second language acquisition.

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## 1. Theoretical Exposition

### 1.1 Definition

Krashen's Comprehensible Input (i+1) Hypothesis holds that language learners can learn effectively only when they are exposed to input slightly above their current language proficiency. Such input should contain language elements known to the learner (i.e., i) and new elements slightly beyond their comprehension (i.e., +1). This kind of language input can stimulate learners' motivation and help them absorb new knowledge naturally in a low-pressure environment.

### 1.2 Argumentation Methods

Krashen mainly supported his theory by observing and analyzing the natural acquisition process of second language learners and comparing the actual effects of different teaching methods (e.g., traditional grammar instruction vs. meaning-based communicative approaches). He synthesized a large number of empirical research data, especially noting that learners tend to master a second language better in a more natural and communicative language environment. Krashen believed that language input is the driving force of natural acquisition, rather than deliberate memorization and repetitive practice.

### 1.3 Evidential Basis

Most of Krashen's research is based on the empirical experience of learners<sup>[1]</sup>, emphasizing the impact of actual language use situations on language acquisition. He cited cases in which learners naturally acquire language through exposure to various forms of language (such as stories, games, daily conversations, etc.) in multiple situations. In addition, he referred to

psychological and educational theories, especially studies on the role of motivation and emotion in the learning process, and how they optimize learning effects by reducing anxiety and improving self-efficacy.

## 2. Demonstration of Follow-up Studies

Deng Yueping applied Krashen's Comprehensible Input Theory in his study *A Study on the Feasibility of Autonomous Reading Based on Network Resources and College English Acquisition*<sup>[2]</sup>, and proposed an autonomous reading model based on network resources to promote college English acquisition. The paper analyzes two key conditions of the Comprehensible Input Theory: the input content must be slightly above the learners' current level, and the focus should be on content comprehension rather than language form. Deng Yueping argued that autonomous reading using abundant network resources can greatly increase students' language input, help improve their vocabulary and practical application ability, and deepen their understanding of English culture. However, he also pointed out that input language must pass through affective filtering to be effectively absorbed; therefore, affective factors such as motivation and confidence are crucial to language acquisition.

Deng Lianjian and Yang Liexiang introduced the Intake Hypothesis in *The Intake Hypothesis in Second Language Acquisition*<sup>[3]</sup> as an important supplement to the Input Hypothesis and the Output Hypothesis. Krashen's Input Hypothesis holds that sufficient comprehensible input is the key to successful second language acquisition, but it ignores the learners' individual initiative and the actual effect of input in non-linguistic environments. Swain's Output Hypothesis emphasizes the importance of output in second language acquisition, prompting learners to internalize language structures through language use. However, neither hypothesis fully explains the internal psychological mechanism of second language acquisition. The Intake Hypothesis points out that the core of language acquisition lies in maximizing and optimizing the intake process, which includes multiple interrelated psychological processes such as simplification, inference, construction, and reconstruction. The Intake Hypothesis emphasizes that not all input can be absorbed as linguistic knowledge; only through complex psychological processing and selective attention can input be transformed into effective language internalization. The Intake Hypothesis integrates the strengths of the Input and Output Hypotheses, further explains the complex process of second language acquisition, and highlights the importance of learners' initiative and internal cognitive transformation.

The paper *A Practical Study on English Immersion Contextual Input and Children's Second Language Acquisition*<sup>[4]</sup> supports Krashen's theory, especially emphasizing the importance of comprehensible input. Through practical cases and research, the paper shows that providing language input in real situations can effectively promote language acquisition, which is completely consistent with Krashen's Input Hypothesis. In addition, the paper recognizes the importance of immersive learning environments and supports Krashen's views on low anxiety and natural interaction.

However, the paper also puts forward some objections. It points out that Krashen ignored the importance of interaction and output in language acquisition, citing Swain's Output Hypothesis to emphasize that output practice in interaction can improve language fluency. The paper also refutes Krashen's complete opposition to error correction, referring to studies showing that moderate error correction helps learners overcome mistakes.

The paper *Exploring the Theoretical Basis of Krashen's "Thematic Reading" Theory*<sup>[5]</sup> supports Krashen's theories of "comprehensible input" and "thematic reading", arguing that understanding language input above the current level and focused reading of related materials contribute to language acquisition. But it also raises objections, pointing out that Krashen ignored the role of interaction and output in language learning, citing Swain's views to emphasize the importance of output, and criticizing Krashen's complete rejection of error correction strategies, arguing that moderate error correction helps improve language accuracy.

## 3. Theoretical Evaluation

### 3.1 Strengths

Emphasis on natural language acquisition: Krashen's theory stresses that language should be acquired through natural absorption rather than deliberate learning, which is similar to the natural process of children learning their first language. This approach is more humanistic and reduces learners' pressure and anxiety.

Guidance for teaching practice: The theory provides practical guidance for language teaching and promotes methods such

as task-based learning, communicative language teaching, and content-based learning. These methods encourage teachers to create real and functional communication environments to stimulate learners' interest and motivation.

Focus on the quality and appropriateness of input: The theory points out that only "comprehensible" input can effectively promote language acquisition, which emphasizes the importance of content appropriateness in textbook development and curriculum design.

Educational inclusiveness: The theory advocates providing appropriate levels of language input for learners of different proficiency levels, helping to meet diverse learning needs and differentiated instruction.

### 3.2 Weaknesses

Difficulty in accurately defining and implementing  $i+1$ : The " $+1$ " in the theory is difficult to quantify specifically, and the " $+1$ " level varies among different learners, which challenges teachers' operation in actual teaching.

Limitations of over-reliance on input: Although Krashen emphasizes the importance of input, the theory pays little attention to the role of learners' active output. Language output (such as speaking and writing practice) is also extremely important for language acquisition and is a key process for internalizing linguistic knowledge and testing learning outcomes.

Ignoring the practicality of grammar instruction: Although the theory tends to downplay direct grammar teaching, existing studies show that direct grammar guidance can help learners understand and master language structures more quickly in some cases, especially for adult learners.

Limited empirical basis: Although Krashen cited various case studies to support his theory, critics argue that it lacks extensive empirical data support and reserve opinions on the universality and persistence of the theory's effects.

Ignoring socio-cultural factors: The theory mainly focuses on the psychological mechanism from input to acquisition, and does not discuss in detail how external factors such as socio-culture affect language acquisition, which limits the comprehensiveness of the theory to a certain extent.

### 3.3 Contradictions and Consistencies with Other Theories

The Project-Based Foreign Language Teaching Theory (PBLLI) proposed by Liu Yudong<sup>[6]</sup> emphasizes promoting language learning through practical projects, focusing on students' active participation and task-driven learning. Compared with Krashen's Comprehensible Input Theory ( $i+1$ ), PBLLI has contradictions: the linguistic complexity of tasks does not necessarily conform to the " $i+1$ " model, and PBLLI emphasizes the importance of language output, while Krashen regards output as unnecessary. The consistency between the two is that both emphasize language use in real situations and enhance learners' motivation and interest. PBLLI stimulates students' interest through projects, enabling them to better absorb language input in a low-anxiety environment, supplementing and expanding Krashen's theory.

In her paper *Research on Language Input and Output Theories and English Teaching*<sup>[7]</sup>, Fu Yan analyzed Krashen's Comprehensible Input Theory and affirmed its view of promoting language acquisition through the " $i+1$ " model. However, she also pointed out the limitation of Krashen's theory, namely overemphasizing input while ignoring the importance of output. Combining Swain's Output Hypothesis<sup>[8]</sup>, the paper holds that language output is equally crucial in feedback and promoting language internalization, and emphasizes that relying solely on input may lead to the consolidation of language errors. Based on this, Fu Yan proposed that input and output should be equally important in foreign language learning and suggested balancing the two in English teaching in China to improve the quality of language acquisition. Overall, Fu Yan's research supports Krashen's theory while also emphasizing the important role of output in language learning.

In his study "Language Input" and *College English Writing Teaching*<sup>[9]</sup>, Xu Xianqiao demonstrated the theory combined with college English writing teaching. He supports Krashen's view that language acquisition can be achieved by understanding input ( $i+1$ ) slightly above learners' current level, especially in college English writing teaching, and introducing reading materials of appropriate difficulty helps improve writing ability. However, Xu Xianqiao also pointed out the limitation of the theory, that is, relying solely on input cannot fully meet the needs of language acquisition, and attention should also be paid to language output and interaction. Over-reliance on input may lead students to ignore language forms and affect language accuracy. Therefore, the paper emphasizes that input and output should be balanced in writing teaching to comprehensively improve language ability.

The paper Exploring an Output-Driven Teaching Model of Senior High School English Reading and Writing<sup>[10]</sup> is consistent with Comprehensible Input in that it recognizes Krashen's Input Hypothesis and holds that a large amount of comprehensible input is crucial for language learning. Through reading and listening, students can accumulate linguistic knowledge and lay the foundation for language output.

However, the paper emphasizes the core role of output in language learning, which contradicts Krashen's view. Krashen believed that language acquisition mainly depends on input, while output is only a manifestation of input. Based on Swain's Output Hypothesis, the paper points out that output (such as writing and speaking practice) is indispensable in enhancing language ability and correcting errors. Experiments have proved that the output-driven teaching model significantly improves students' comprehensive language ability, refuting Krashen's neglect of the role of output.

## 4. Value and Contribution

### 4.1 Academic Value

Krashen's Comprehensible Input Theory provides a theoretical basis for the natural process of second language acquisition, especially emphasizing the importance of language input. The theory holds that the natural acquisition of language, similar to the process of first language acquisition, requires a large amount of appropriately leveled language input. This concept has important academic value because it supports the transformation to more natural and learner-centered educational methods, such as immersion teaching and content-based teaching strategies. In addition, the theory has challenged traditional form-oriented language teaching methods and promoted the transformation of second language teaching practice to communicative language teaching.

### 4.2 Explanatory Power

The explanatory power of Krashen's theory lies in providing a clear theoretical framework for the relationship between input and learners' language proficiency in second language acquisition. The hypothetical "i+1" provides a theoretical tool to explain why some teaching methods are more effective. Specifically, this model emphasizes that only when teaching materials are slightly higher than learners' current ability can they stimulate learning motivation and cognitive challenges, thereby promoting language acquisition. This theoretical perspective provides researchers with a method to quantify and evaluate the effectiveness of teaching input, helping to scientifically test and verify the effects of teaching methods.

In addition, Krashen's theory has enhanced the understanding of the learning environment and learner interaction by pointing out the relationship between language output (i.e., self-expression) and language input. Although the original theory mainly emphasizes the importance of input, its implications for language use environments also provide a theoretical basis for further research on language output.

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## Conflict of Interests

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