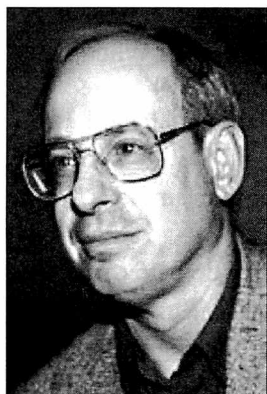


# The Autonomous Language Acquirer (ALA): Definition, rationale, and some suggestions



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## ABOUT STEPHEN

Stephen Krashen is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Southern California. He is best known for developing the first comprehensive theory of second language acquisition, introducing the concept of sheltered subject matter teaching, and as the co-inventor of the Natural Approach. He has also contributed to theory and application in the area of bilingual education, and has done important work in the area of reading. He holds a PhD in Linguistics from UCLA, was the 1977 Incline Bench Press champion of Venice Beach and holds a black belt in Tae Kwon Do. His recent papers can be found at <http://www.sdkrashen.com>.

クラッシュェン博士は、南カリフォルニア大学名誉教授(教育学)です。初めて総合的に第二言語習得理論を明らかにし、シェルタード・サブジェクト・ティーチングの概念を広め、またナチュラル・アプローチの共同考案者として最もよく知られています。バイリンガル教育の理論と応用の分野にも貢献し、リーディングの分野でも重要な業績を残しました。カリフォルニア大学ロサンゼルス校の言語学の博士号を取得、1977年のベニス・ビーチにおけるバーベル上げコンテストのチャンピオン、テコンドーの黒帯を持っています。彼の最近の著作は以下のサイトで見ることができます。 <http://www.sdkrashen.com>.

## ABSTRACT

*The goal of language pedagogy is not to develop fully proficient speakers of the second or foreign language; it is, rather, to help acquirers become autonomous, so they can improve on their own. The autonomous language acquirer needs to understand how language is acquired, as well as develop enough competence to get comprehensible input from the “outside world.” This requires an arsenal of strategies for dealing with native speakers, the media, and, perhaps most important, an understanding of the power of recreational reading in increasing second language ability.*

語学教育の目標は、第二言語や外国語の完璧で熟練した話者を育てることではなく、学習者が自律するのを援助することである。オートノミーによって自分で語学を勉強することができるようになる。自律的語学習得者は、言語が習得される過程、また実社会から理解できるインプットを得るのに十分に足る能力を身につける必要がある。このためには、ネイティブ・スピーカーやメディアに対処するためのストラテジーの蓄積と、趣味としての読書によって第二言語の能力を伸ばすことが重要である。

The autonomous language acquirer (ALA) is defined here as the acquirer who (1) understands how language is acquired, and (2) is able to get the input necessary for language acquisition, whether formal programs are available or not, whether in the foreign or second language situation.

## HOW IS LANGUAGE ACQUIRED?

There is by now overwhelming evidence that we acquire language in only one way: When we obtain comprehensible input, i.e. messages we understand. We acquire language when we understand what people say to us, and what we read. The evidence for this central hypothesis comes from a number of sources, reviewed in Krashen (2003, 2004a):

- (1) Students in classes that contain more comprehensible input do better than similar students in traditional classes, both at the beginning and intermediate levels.
- (2) Students in classes that emphasize free voluntary (self-selected) reading do better than students in traditional classes.
- (3) Those who get more comprehensible input outside of class acquire more language than those who get less.

In addition, there are a number of compelling arguments against alternative views of language acquisition. Language cannot be acquired from output alone, because people do not produce enough output to have a significant impact. While speaking can help language acquisition indirectly, by encouraging others to talk to us (conversation), there is no evidence that output plays any direct role in language acquisition (Krashen, 2003). Speaking, it is hypothesized, is not a cause of language acquisition but is a result of language acquisition, a result of obtaining comprehensible input.

There are several fundamental arguments against the most widely-used way of attempting to learn languages: grammar study. Attaining a conscious knowledge of language cannot be the key to language acquisition because (1) the grammatical system is far too complex to consciously learn, and (2) grammar study produces only a very modest effect on performance in a second language, and grammar rules are “fragile” (easy to forget, hard to learn) (Truscott, 1998, 2004; Krashen, 2003).

I have hypothesized (Krashen, 1981) that conscious knowledge of grammar is only available to us in language performance as a Monitor: We can use grammar only to edit what we write and say. In addition, studies show that there are severe limits on the use of the Monitor, limits in terms of rules (only very simple ones) and limits in terms of when consciously learned rules can be used (when we are thinking about correctness, and when we have time).

## **AFFECT**

Research is consistent with the hypothesis that affective factors in language acquisition act as barriers (Stevick, 1976; Krashen, 1981). They do not affect how the “language acquisition device” works; rather, they act to keep input out of the device. Those who do not have the optimal attitudes about language acquisition are said to have a strong “affective filter.”

It appears to be the case that if we engage in practices that run counter to the “comprehension hypothesis” expressed above, we raise the affective filter, we increase the acquirer’s anxiety, which blocks input from reading the language acquisition device. This happens when input is not comprehensible or not interesting, that is, when it is confusing or boring. It also happens when students are forced to talk before they have built up sufficient competence to do so, and when they are overcorrected and made to feel self-conscious about their accuracy. In contrast, activities that are good for language acquisition, such as hearing stories and self-selected reading, are typically perceived to be pleasant (Krashen, 2003).

## **THE ALA IN THE CLASSROOM**

Regardless of whether the class is in harmony or not with the theory of language acquisition, the Autonomous Language Acquirer (ALA) is aware that the language class is not designed to make the ALA into a native-like or even very high-level performer in the language. Language classes are designed to develop intermediates, those who know enough of the language so they can continue to improve on their own, after the program has ended.

How will the ALA know if the class is in tune with the theory? In classes that are consistent with theory, the syllabus is based on topics of interest, rather than grammatical mastery, students are not forced to speak (i.e. they are not called on) but respond voluntarily, the teacher uses a variety of ways of making input comprehensible (e.g. pictures, movements, providing background knowledge in the first language) and students are exposed to a wide variety of reading material for self-selected reading (see e.g. Krashen and Terrell, 1983; Brown and Palmer, 1988; Ray and Seeley, 2004).

If the class is not set up in harmony with the theory, the ALA must be aware that the method runs counter to the way the brain works, and that failure and discomfort are not the ALA’s fault. Nearly all classes, however, will contain some comprehensible input; the issue is whether it is worth attending a class to get only scraps of what is needed. If the class is a requirement, the best way of dealing with it is to get one’s comprehensible input outside of class.<sup>1</sup>

Here is a suggestion for the motivated beginner, based on my experience and what others have told me: Buy or borrow about 10 beginning textbooks in the target language, based on traditional, grammar-translation methodology. Read the reading passages that are part of each chapter, glancing at the vocabulary and grammar sections only when necessary to make the passage comprehensible. Don’t try to remember the specific vocabulary and grammar; just use them as a means of understanding the passage when the text itself is insufficient.

If you move from chapter to chapter in one book, you will discover that the reading sections became much too hard very soon. This is because each passage is designed to “reinforce” the new grammar and vocabulary that are the focus of each chapter. The solution is to read chapter one of each text, then read chapter two of each text, and so forth. By the time you get to chapter eight or nine of ten different texts, you will have developed a surprising amount of competence in the new language. Even though texts differ as to which aspects of grammar and which vocabulary they cover, there will be enough overlap, enough common vocabulary and grammar, to ensure that the texts are reasonably comprehensible and that language acquisition will take place.

### THE ALA OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

As noted earlier, the goal of the classroom is to bring students' competence to the intermediate level. The intermediate ALA needs to be adept at getting comprehensible input from the outside world, even in the foreign language situation where the language is not spoken in society to a large extent.

### INTERACTING WITH NATIVE SPEAKERS

The ALA knows how to find native speakers who will provide comprehensible input and knows to avoid those who will not.

But the ALA also knows that language is not a good basis for friendship. Some people may provide clear, comprehensible input, but are boring, irritating, or in other ways just not right for the ALA. An ALA will be very lucky to find someone who is a real friend, and who can supply comprehensible input as well. It may be the case that all the ALA needs is one person like this to acquire the language.

The technique of "narrow listening" (Krashen, 1996) shows great promise. In narrow listening, the ALA listens to recordings of several speakers talking about the same topic, something that the acquirer is interested in. Ideally, the acquirer records others him/herself, recording friends or acquaintances who speak the language. The ALA can then listen to the tape as many times as he or she likes.

Repeated listening, interest in the topic, and familiar context help make the input comprehensible. Topics are gradually changed, which allows the acquirer to expand his or her competence comfortably. Narrow listening is a low-tech, inexpensive way to obtain comprehensible input.

Research done so far suggests that narrow listening can be an effective form of aural comprehensible input for the ALA. Rodrigo and Krashen (1996) reported that students of Spanish as a foreign language were enthusiastic about narrow listening: 92% said the activity was very interesting and beneficial. Their subjects reported that selecting their own topics and their own speakers was more effective and interesting than hearing pre-selected tapes in a classroom situation. Dupuy (1999) reported a clear increase in comprehensibility with repeated hearings of narrow listening tapes for students of French as a foreign language. Students did not record the native speakers themselves but could choose the topics they listened to.

Note that both of these studies were done with students enrolled in foreign language classes. Narrow listening promises to be even more effective for the dedicated ALA.

### READING

Pleasure reading would seem to be the most obvious place to get comprehensible input, and as mentioned earlier, there is an abundance of research showing that it is very effective (reviewed in McQuillan, 1998; Pilgreen, 2000; Krashen, 2004). Few ALAs appear to take advantage of it, however. Stephenson and Kohyama asked 50 university students of EFL in Japan to carry out autonomous English learning projects over one semester. Despite the fact that the suggested projects included reading books, comics, magazines, and newspapers (See the *More Autonomy You Ask!* website for Appendix 1A), few students chose these options: Only two said they read newspapers, and three read children's books. Similarly, Brown (2005) asked 171 first year college students in Japan to provide suggestions on how to improve competence in English. Reading was mentioned by only 20 students (12%).

There are several guidelines that ALAs might consider when doing recreational reading in the second language. These guidelines are consistent with the research literature and are also influenced by my own experiences and what others have told me.

- **Make it easy.** Read books, magazines, and comics that do not require a great deal of effort, that are well within your ability. There is nothing to be gained by “working” through texts that are “challenging” and that require grim determination.
- **Lower your standards.** When doing recreational reading, there is no need to read classics, no need to read “quality literature.” (There is, in fact, good reason to doubt that the concept of “quality literature” has a great deal of validity; Nell, 1988). There is no reason at this stage to read books that give you a special insight into another culture or that will make the ALA a “better person.” It is OK to read books in translation.

This is a wonderful opportunity to read what the ALA really wants to read with no guilt. A massive amount of pleasurable reading of this kind will build the competence that will make more “serious” reading much more comprehensible, assuming that the ALA wants to “move on” or needs to read difficult texts professionally. (For evidence that “light” reading can serve as a conduit to heavier reading, see Krashen, 2004a).

- **Read narrowly** (Krashen, 2004b). Rather than attempting to read widely, and becoming “well-rounded,” the ALA can take advantage of narrow reading, that is, reading several books by one author or about a single topic of interest.

Narrow reading speeds acquisition in several ways. First, it provides built-in review – each writer has favorite expressions and a distinctive style, and each topic has its own discourse features and vocabulary. Second, narrow readers gain more knowledge as they read narrowly: The more one reads in one area, the more one learns about the area, and the easier one finds subsequent reading in the area (and the more one acquires of the language).

ALAs understand that deep reading in any topic will provide exposure to a tremendous amount of syntax and vocabulary that is used in other topics. The ALA does not have to attempt to cover a wide variety of texts. Massive reading in any genre will build a tremendous amount of competence, enough so that nearly all other kinds of reading are more comprehensible. It is true that styles and genres differ in their syntactic and organizational characteristics, but there is also considerable overlap (Biber, 1986).

There is some evidence supporting the narrow reading idea. Lamme (1976) found that good readers in English as a first language tended to read more books by a single author and books from a series. More recently, Cho and Krashen (1994, 1995) reported considerable enthusiasm for reading and substantial vocabulary development among adult second language acquirers who read books in the Sweet Valley series; readers rapidly moved from Sweet Valley Kids (second grade level) to Sweet Valley Twins (fourth grade level) to Sweet Valley High (fifth and sixth grade level). Several readers in these studies had never read a book in English for pleasure before, but became fanatic Sweet Valley fans.

- **Carry the book or magazine with you everywhere.** Few people have “time to read.” The ALA carries a book with him or her, and assumes, correctly, that the world will conspire to give the ALA time to read through the day, standing in line, waiting for a bus, waiting for service in restaurants, and so forth.

## MEDIA

In Brown's study of student preferences for independent language acquisition activities (Brown, 2005, discussed above), 51 out of 171 suggestions were related to media, 25 for TV, and movies and 16 to news on TV or radio.

As noted above, the ALA understands that language is not a good basis for friendship. Similarly, language alone is not a good basis for reading a book, watching a television program or watching a movie. The ALA only reads or watches something he or she is really interested in, something the ALA would read or watch in the primary language.

When there is little or no interest in the subject matter, the mind wanders. When it does not wander, the ALA's focus might be more on language (what verb form was that?) and less on meaning. In both cases, there is less comprehensible input. When the topic is genuinely interesting, the ALA can get "lost in the book" (Nell, 1988), or become fully absorbed in the film. The ALA then enters a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992), in which only the story exists and the sense of self is diminished and can even disappear. When this happens, the ALA is not even aware that he or she is reading or listening to another language. This is when real language acquisition takes place.

The problem with media, of course, is that it can be hard for the intermediate-level language acquirer to understand. This is especially true of films. Cho (in press) has developed a simple but powerful way of dealing with this. Cho reports that when students of English as a foreign language read a simplified version of the book corresponding to the film, the film became significantly more comprehensible. Viewing the same film twice, however, had no effect on comprehensibility. Reading a simplified version of the book makes sense: It gives the viewer some idea of the story and characters, but leaves plenty of the story left over, enough to make sure the film version remains interesting.

## CONCLUSION

A major goal of pedagogy is to develop autonomous language acquirers, to give students the tools to continue to improve their competence in the second language of their choice. Unless it is the only possible source of input, or unless the topic of the class is of particular interest (i.e. a sheltered subject matter class), the language acquirer need not return to school for a refresher course. The language teaching profession does not need repeat business, and the intermediate is in a position to do better without us, if he or she is an ALA.

The ALA needs to have two essential characteristics: A clear idea of how language is acquired, and an arsenal of strategies for getting comprehensible input from speakers, books and media. The strategies presented here are, of course, not the final word. As ALAs share their successes and failures, our hope is that ALAs will become even more autonomous.

## NOTE

1. Getting your comprehensible input outside of class can sometimes get you in trouble if you are too successful. Here is what happened to one unintentional ALA:

Y. Cohen (1997) attended an English-language medium school in her native Turkey, beginning at age 12. The first two years were devoted to intensive English study, and Cohen reports that after only two months, she started to read in English, "as many books in English as I could get hold of. I had a rich, ready made library of English



books at home ... I became a member of the local British Council's library and occasionally purchased English books in bookstores ... By the first year of middle school I had become an avid reader of English."

Her reading, however, led to an "unpleasant incident" in middle school:

"I had a new English teacher who assigned us two compositions for homework. She returned them to me ungraded, furious. She wanted to know who had helped me write them. They were my personal work. I had not even used the dictionary. She would not believe me. She pointed at a few underlined sentences and some vocabulary and asked me how I knew them; they were well beyond the level of the class. I had not even participated much in class. I was devastated. There and then and many years later I could not explain how I knew them. I just did."