THE POWER OF READING, OR THE CONSEQUENCES OF TESTING LANGUAGE SKILLS

Speaker: Stephen Krashen, University of Southern California
Interviewer/Recorder: Lawrence J. Luck, Goshen Community College, Ohio

Stephen Krashen devoted his presentation and follow-up discussion to research done on the effects of “reading exposure,” which he defines as the reading children and adults do for fun and personal interest. The results of the research done so far indicate that people who read for pleasure do significantly better in all areas of language use: reading comprehension, vocabulary development, grammatical correctness, writing style, and spelling. These findings point to the importance of having the opportunity to read for pleasure without the additional baggage of assigned readings, comprehension questions, book reports, vocabulary drills—all the trappings of standard academic readers. Krashen maintains that it is this opportunity which is lacking in most educational systems.

Krashen emphasized the correlation between reading and writing. He noted that it is not the number of books read which is a predictor of academic writing success; rather, it is the level of sophistication of that reading which predicts how successful a reader and writer will become. But even a reader who never goes beyond the level of comic books will achieve minimal success in writing, and greater success than one who has never done pleasurable reading. Krashen cited several research studies which support the link between reading and writing. Surprisingly, not a great deal of research has been done in this area. The first research Krashen discussed is on sustained silent reading (SSR) programs, in which school children pick their own reading material and read for varying amounts of time each day, though they are not held accountable for their reading. Most of the studies Krashen referred to show SSR to be superior to traditional classroom reading skills programs. In one particularly noteworthy experiment, fourth through sixth grade students received SSR as their total English program. By the end of the second year, SSR students were rated superior in all aspects of English tested to students taught in conventional ways. Krashen concluded that, at worst, SSR produces the same results as a standard language arts program. At best, if the system operates a year longer, it works better than conventional programs.

Citing another series of studies that show the superiority of self-selected reading over assigned readings in a traditional reader, Krashen pointed out that students are more enthusiastic and better disciplined in self-selected reading programs. In studies where there was no comparison group, gains in reading comprehension and other skills were compared to norms on standardized tests. Here again, the results in the majority of cases were positive for self-selected reading. Even in the area of spelling, Krashen reported that, although some schools spend a great deal of time teaching spelling, the time spent produces no appreciable gains in ability. In fact, according to one study, by the seventh and eighth grades, those students who had received no systematic spelling instruction scored the same on spelling tests as students who had been exposed to several different spelling programs in the preceding school years. Krashen's conclusion is that the time given over to spelling and the teaching of other reading skills in many school districts could more profitably be devoted to self-selected programs of SSR. It would also remove a lot of the burden now placed on teachers.

Krashen is convinced that reading for pleasure and interest is the most important educational component and the most reliable predictor of future academic success. Reading is the one skill which has the most predictable and positive effect on the development of all language skills. Since Krashen believes that writing styles and the conventions of writing are gained through pleasurable reading, he concludes that tests of writing are actually tests of reading.

PLACEMENT TESTING: ISSUES AND MODELS

Speaker: William Smith, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Interviewer/Recorder: Sue K. Ham, University of Akron, Ohio

As he introduced his topic, William Smith reminded his audience that when they use placement tests, they must first assume that “places” exist; that is, there must be various levels of instruction in which to enroll students to optimize their progress. There are also many ways to derive such placement, the most common being SAT scores and/or direct assessment with an essay. Even though placement essays may be graded holistically, such assessment is not necessarily the same as purely holistic rating. Since the placement essays may represent an abnormal distribution of the population, one cannot expect to always see bell-curved data when examining test results.

Smith suggests seven steps in a basic schematic for a placement program: (1) Determine your program's theory of composition and purpose(s) and teaching method(s). (2) In relation to that theory, analyze the student population’s writing abilities. (3) Determine what the composition groups will be—how many groups there will be and what each group will be taught. (4) Design an assessment method which is consistent with the theory. Depending on your theory and your purpose, that method could be a grammar test, SAT scores, or an essay. (5) Design the actual assessment tool. (6) Field-test the assessment tool with students. (7) Revise the test based on the results of the field tests. Other important items that any placement program must consider include the time to allow for testing, the date of the test, the money available for testing and scoring, and how high or low to make the pass/fail cut-off. Since such considerations and the needs of individual institutions and individual students vary so greatly and change over the years, one must not be content to do anything just once; it takes years to develop an appropriate program, and one must be content with, even enjoy, the sometimes slow process of discovering what it is one needs to know.

Smith pointed out that it is usually necessary to try out several different types of writing assignments before deciding what kind of topic best fits the particular goals