

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

**Speaker:** Stephen Krashen, University of Southern California

**Introducer/Recorder:** Lawrence J. Luck, Cuyahoga 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 one 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 or 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. ■