

José Manuel Rodríguez and Francisco Ramos quiz the world's foremost advocate of bilingual education

A Conversation with Krashen



Without a doubt, Stephen Krashen is one of the world's foremost authorities in the fields of language acquisition and language education. He is the author of more than 400 books and articles on topics ranging from reading and access to libraries to bilingual education, bilingualism, and second language acquisition, among them *Foundations of Second Language Education*, *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, *The Natural Approach* (with Tracy Terrell), *The Power of Reading* and, more recently, *English Learners in American Classrooms*, and *Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use*. Dr. Krashen has also coined terms and concepts that have influenced researchers, educators, practitioners, and language learners worldwide, among them comprehensible input, the Monitor, the affective filter, sheltered instruction, and Free Voluntary Reading. Currently retired from the University of Southern California, he enjoys his status as emeritus professor at USC while still publishing on a myriad of topics.

Bilingualism is an asset for you. What are some of its benefits?

There are several benefits and no disadvantages. First, bilingualism makes you smarter! A number of studies show that bilinguals do (slightly) better in school, and Ellen Bialystok's recent research suggests that bilingualism reduces some of the negative effects of aging and can even delay the onset of senility!

Here are the references, for those interested in staying young:

Bialystok, E., Craik, F., Klein, R & Viswanathan, M. (2004). "Bilingualism, aging, and cognitive control: Evidence from the Simon task." *Psychology and Aging* 19(2): 290-303. Bialystok, E., et al. (2007). "Bilingualism as a protection against the onset of symptoms of dementia." *Neuropsychologia*, 45: 459-464.

In addition, bilingualism leads to better economic opportunities, for both the nation and the individual. See Crawford, J., & Krashen, S. (2007). *English Learners in American Classrooms — 101 Questions, 101 Answers*. NY: Scholastic.

What are some ingredients of an effective second language teaching method/approach for school-aged children? In your experience, is this what is currently being implemented in classrooms?

There are two important ingredients: We need to provide students with a great deal of comprehensible input, the essential ingredient in language acquisition. Several decades of research has confirmed that we acquire language when we understand what we read or what we hear. This means filling the classroom hour with aural comprehensible input and making sure students establish a pleasure reading habit in the second language. It is crucial that the input be not only interesting, but compelling; so interesting that students forget it is in a second language. The second ingredient is making sure students know how language is acquired, so that they can continue to improve in the language after the course is over, and acquire other languages.

A few methods in use today follow these principles, such as TPRS (Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling), developed by Blaine Ray, and intermediate approaches that focus on teaching content and emphasizing extensive reading, but they are the exception and not the rule.

What measures would you introduce in schools to promote/increase bilingualism among students?

Let me first say what I would not do: Insist on immersion programs in which children begin in kindergarten or first grade, and are exposed to the second language all day. This is not necessary. It is, in fact, actually more efficient to start the second language a little later, for example, in grades four or five, ages ten or 11. We know that older children progress faster than younger children; it is more cost-efficient to start later.

We should also consider what our goals are. In my view, our goal is to help students develop enough proficiency so that they can improve on their own without us, so that they can understand at least some authentic texts in the second language and can interact with speakers. We don't need a full immersion program for this: One period a day over several years, if done right, will easily do the job.

Does reading have a role in bilingualism or second language acquisition? If so, what is it?

Reading has a huge role. I invite readers of this paper to have a look at a review I recently completed on the impact of self-selected reading on English as a foreign language. I examined studies from a number of countries and found no exceptions: In every case, students in classes that included self-selected reading in English did better than those in traditional classes, and there was some evidence that making more books available gave better results. This article is published in a free on-line journal, *The International Review of Applied Linguistics* (ijflt.com), Fall, 2007. Many of the individual research projects on extensive reading in second language acquisition are also published in this journal, articles by Beniko Mason, Kyung-Sook Cho, Syying Lee, Ken Smith, and others.

The kind of reading that seems to be the most effective is reading that is genuinely interesting, or compelling, and the easy way to make sure this happens is to allow students to select at least some of their reading in their second language.

In light of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Proposition 227, the English-Only movement... what is the future of bilingualism in the U.S.? Why?

Proposition 227 was a very strange event. California voters voted to dismantle bilingual education, which was followed by similar actions in two other states. They did this because they thought that allowing immigrant children to have instruction in their first language (usually Spanish), would prevent them from acquiring English, or at least slow it down.

What voters did not know is that research consistently says that children in bilingual programs acquire English faster than those in all-English immersion programs. Also, research by Fay Shin, Christy Lao, Francisco Ramos and others has shown that most people are in agreement with the principles underlying bilingual education, i.e. the idea that if you are literate in one language, it is easier to develop literacy in another, and the idea that if you learn about a subject in your first language, you will understand more when it is presented in a second language. Voters also don't know that in the decade since Proposition 227 and similar propositions passed, every scientific study published has shown that dropping bilingual education did not improve the acquisition of English (for more details, please see Crawford and Krashen, 2007).

Bilingualism in the U.S. only has a future if it is explained to the public and the research becomes well-known.

How would you explain NCLB to a layperson?

NCLB has two components: A massive amount of testing in English and Mathematics, and the use of a specific approach to reading, called intensive, systematic phonics, in which children learn all the major rules of phonics presented in a strict order.

In your opinion, what are some positive and negative aspects of the law? Why?

There are no positive aspects of the law. There is no evidence that the massive testing helps; in fact, some studies suggest that it is harmful (see for example Alfie Kohn's book, *The Case Against Standardized Testing*). There is also no evidence that NCLB's approach to reading (called Reading First) has helped (see e.g. Krashen, S. 2008, "Bogus Claims about Reading First," *Rethinking Schools* 22 (3): 32-33, available on www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/22_03/bogu223.shtml). Most interesting is the fact that several studies done by U.S. Department of Education have concluded that Reading First has not resulted in any improvement in reading; in fact, children in this program may be even worse off; they do no better than children not in the program in reading comprehension but have far more instructional time in reading.

How has NCLB affected language minority students, minority languages, and educational programs in the U.S.?

The impact has been very negative. The requirement that all children be tested in the lower grades in English has pushed schools to eliminate bilingual education, because of the false idea that more exposure to English will lead to better test scores on tests given in English.

If you had a say in the reauthorization of NCLB, what modifications would you introduce in its text? What would you recommend?

I would eliminate it entirely. There is not a single reason to keep it. We already have enough testing, and the reading method NCLB insists on is not effective.

And finally, you are an adamant advocate of Free Voluntary Reading (FVR). Now you talk about Free Voluntary Surfing (FVS). What is it and why do you advocate it? Aren't there any threats and/or dangers associated with FVS (information overload for children, incomprehensible information on webpages, absence of guides directing students to reputable pages)?

Free Voluntary Surfing means encouraging second language acquirers to surf the net in their second language, simply following their own interests.

My paper (also available at the International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, 2007, ijflt.com) presents the research behind this idea, research showing the popularity of surfing, showing that those who surf more also read more, and even read better, but also showing that few people surf in their second language. Surfing should work for the same reason free voluntary reading works. Of course, there are issues of appropriateness, but this is true for input from other sources as well, movies, books and television. **X**

References

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Many of Dr. Krashen's publications are also available on his website: www.sdkrashen.com.

Dr. Krashen shared his views on reading, bilingualism, and No Child Left Behind with **José Manuel Rodríguez**, educational advisor at the Consulate of Spain in Los Angeles, and **Francisco Ramos**, associate professor in the School of Education at Loyola Marymount University, also located in Los Angeles.