1. Voluntary pleasure reading contributes to the development of writing ability; it is a more important factor than writing frequency in improving writing.

2. Practice in writing is related to improvement in writing.

3. Feedback is useful when it is provided during the writing process; it is not useful when it is given after the paper has been completed.

4. Grammar instruction is not effective in helping students write; reading is more valuable.

5. Good writers differ from poor writers in their composing process: they plan more than poor writers; they rescan and review their developing drafts more; and they do more revising of meaning (as opposed to making minor changes that don’t alter the meaning).

In the second section—“Competence and Performance in Writing”—Krashen offers a theory to explain the results described in the first section. In his Introduction Krashen mentions that when he asked graduate students who taught freshman composition at USC why they used the methods they did, their explanations were a mixture of “rumor, fashion, or tradition” (p. 1). None of them said they were influenced by current research. Research has failed to influence teaching practice, Krashen believes, because teachers have tried to apply the wrong theories (transformational grammar, for example) and because there hasn’t been any unifying theory that would give coherence to research results like those he summarizes in section I.

Krashen intends to rectify this situation. The theory he proposes is well-known to people in the field of teaching English as a second language because Krashen first proposed it to explain how people acquire a second language. It is based on a distinction between acquisition, the subconscious process of “picking up” a language, and learning, a conscious process of studying rules. According to Krashen, people who have mastered a second language have acquired that second language by being exposed to “comprehensible input,” input just a little ahead of the acquirers’ present level of competence. They haven’t learned it. The conscious learning of grammatical rules plays a very minor role.
In *Writing: Research, Theory, and Applications*, Krashen applies his theory to learning to write. Writing, in Krashen’s view, is a special dialect which, like a second language, is acquired, not learned. One acquires it by reading; thus his theory explains studies that show a correlation between extensive pleasure reading and writing ability. But reading, while necessary, is not sufficient to ensure the acquisition of writing ability. Reading improves a writer’s competence, his “subconscious ‘feel’” for written language (p. 28). It gives him all the intricacies of a successful style that teachers couldn’t hope to teach as conscious rules because linguists have identified and described only a small portion of them. Reading, however, may not lead to an improvement in performance, “the ability to put this knowledge to use in an actual piece of writing” (p. 20). To improve performance one needs to practice writing. Through practice writers eventually abandon inefficient composing processes and hit upon some that work. Krashen says this part of his theory explains the correlation between amount of practice writing and writing quality.

In his last section—“Applications: Solving Writing Problems”—Krashen offers some advice for teachers of writing. He begins by distinguishing remedial writers from blocked writers. Remedial writers are weak in both competence and performance: they lack competence because they haven’t read enough to acquire the code of written language; they perform badly because they haven’t written enough to develop an efficient composing process. They need to read and write more, a simple conclusion, but a powerful one that administrators and teachers of many remedial courses should ponder, especially those built around workbook exercises on sentence-level matters.

Unlike remedial writers, Krashen’s blocked writers have read enough to acquire the “dialect” of written English; they still write badly, however, because they’re burdened by some inefficient composing strategies. Teachers can help them (and also remedial writers) by informing them of the composing strategies used by experienced writers. Teachers should relieve students of superstitions about writing (“Every essay has to include at least three points,” for example) because researchers have found that they block inexperienced writers. Teachers should teach usage and grammar to help students with the “residue” of conventions that acquisition hasn’t taken care of (the “lose-loose” distinction, the “there-their-the’re” set, for example) but they should not make grammar the centerpiece of their curriculum.

Some readers may object that Krashen overemphasizes empirical research, the kind Donald Graves and other teacher-researchers feel is too “context-stripping” to help the classroom teacher. Krashen does overlook naturalistic or ethnographic research on writing such as that done by Donald Graves, Shirley Brice-Heath, and others, perhaps because much of this research has been done on younger writers. Krashen, in this monograph at least, is more interested in high school and college writers. Krashen does, however, refer to research based on case studies of individual writers (Janet Emig’s work, for example), on protocol analysis (Linda Flower, Sondra Perl), and on error analysis (Mina Shaughnessy). In other words, the researchers whose work he summarizes have looked at more than pre- and post-tests.

Other readers may feel that Krashen’s theory makes everything a bit too coherent. It provides an answer for everything. If a student doesn’t write well, it’s because he hasn’t read enough. If he has read a lot but still hasn’t developed his writing competence, then his “Affective Filter” must be too high—he’s too anxious, feels too insecure, is unable to think of himself as belonging to the world of writers. (When this filter is too high, Krashen says, the input provided by reading “will not reach those parts of the brain that do language acquisition” [p. 28]). If the student has read a lot and has no filter problems but still writes badly, then his composing process must be faulty. It would be dangerous to reify Krashen’s notions and hang on to them even when faced with conflicting data. At this stage of writing research, however, his theory is useful: it allows us to see connections between different research results; it enables us to come to our teaching and researching with clear hypotheses that we can test. If we start getting results that Krashen’s theory can’t explain, then we can alter it or come up with a new theory.

No book can do everything, especially one less than fifty pages long. This is one of the best short reports I’ve seen in some time and I’m going to make it available to Teacher/Consultants in our Summer Institutes. To compress writing research, theory, and applications into forty-nine pages is quite an achievement: Krashen must have read a lot for pleasure as an adolescent.

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