Abstract: Reading has always been an essential element of learning. Extensive reading is enjoyable and has been shown to be as effective as, or more effective than other language learning techniques. Extensive reading also provides much support for Stephen Krashen’s input hypothesis.

This paper argues that teachers make a fundamental mistake in attempting to utilize Krashen’s Input Hypothesis in the classroom. Teachers often provide materials that are too difficult and hinder language acquisition. As a result, students lose their natural motivation.

The Start with Simple Stories (SSS) extensive reading program is offered as a possible remedy.

Keywords: Reading, Extensive reading, Start with Simple Stories (SSS), Input Hypothesis

1. Introduction
The value of reading in education goes back to the very beginning of the written word and learning. In the modern world, we historically view the beginning of formal education as having started with the ancient Greek philosophers. Since that time, reading has been an essential element of learning and, arguably, the most important of the language skills for learners.

Throughout modern history, the classical method of education was the standard method of education. There are three elements to the classical method: grammar, logic and rhetoric. In the past, education was often limited to the wealthy elite and was often a reflection of a cultured upbringing. In more recent times, as public education has become more common, the classical method of education was replaced with more efficient methods of preparing future workers to gain sufficient education to support economic changes in society. Because of the perceived efficiency, the grammar-translation method has replaced the traditional classical method of education and has become quite common in many parts of the world. In Japan, for instance, grammar-translation is the most common method used in teaching English and has resulted in Japanese students having a relatively high level of reading and writing abilities and a relatively low level of speaking and listening abilities.

2. Reading and learning
Reading methods have changed from the classical method in which the classics were read to discover the wisdom within the book to a perceived more efficient intensive reading protocol. Intensive reading focuses on relatively short reading passages usually ranging from 200 to 300 words. The passages are relatively difficult because of the general misunderstanding of Krashen’s input hypothesis, which will be discussed later, and the belief that if the articles were easily understood, the students would not develop new vocabulary nor increase their language ability.

Extensive reading in some ways is a step back to the classical method of education. It changes the focus from just learning the language to a more global approach of seeking
knowledge through the language. Just as in content-based learning, acquiring language is a by-product of gaining knowledge. Waring (2001) has listed a number of research projects that have shown extensive reading to be effective in improving all areas of language learning. However, the extraordinary benefits that can be derived from extensive reading and techniques for making it more effective are not fully appreciated and will be further discussed later in this paper.

3. The Misapplication of Krashen’s Input Hypothesis and the Rabbit Hole

In the children’s story, “Alice in Wonderland”, Alice finds an unbelievable world when she falls down the rabbit hole. In much the same way, teachers seem to have fallen into a trap by the misapplication of Krashen’s input hypothesis.

The input hypothesis states that students’ level of language acquisition increases one level above their comprehension level or “i + 1” when exposed to large amounts of comprehensible materials and new materials that are “i + 1” or one level above the students’ present level of comprehension. This hypothesis seems to be intuitively true and is quite important for researchers; however, it may hinder language acquisition in the classroom (Koch, 2006). One way of explaining this is by imagining a cup of coffee with whipped cream on top. The coffee represents the students level of comprehension while the whipped cream on top represents the “i + 1” level or the next item that the students should learn. Just as there may be bubbles in the coffee itself, there are gaps in students’ English levels. For example, we might assume that two students who have the same TOEIC score would have the same comprehension level. However, because of the gaps in the students’ language ability, the level of the two students is not exactly the same. Thus, a student may be able to teach another student with a similar TOEIC score items of English unknown to the other because one student may have had more exposure to sports while the other student may have had more exposure to music or some other topic.

As teachers strive to be more efficient, they attempt to provide materials at the “i + 1” level in order to speed the students’ language acquisition. However, “i + 1” is a lagging indicator and cannot be known without a pre-test to determine unknown items and a post-test to determine newly learned items. By attempting to provide materials at that “i + 1” level, and because of the gaps at relatively low levels of language ability, teachers are often providing materials that are “i + 2” or higher. The result is that students encounter great difficulty in interacting with the language at such a high level, and that because of a lack of success, the students may lose their natural motivation. The SSS extensive reading program remedies this situation by simply letting the students choose materials at the low end of their comprehension level.

4. The SSS extensive reading program as an effective technique for improving language acquisition

The Start with Simple Stories (SSS) is an extensive reading program invented by Kunihide Sakai and further developed by Akio Furukawa. The seemingly simple program is fully explained in Furukawa (2006). Furukawa also provides many resources in Japanese on the web site: http://www.seg.co.jp. It includes a list of books by level of difficulty and word counts.

The rules of the SSS extensive reading program are quite simple:

1. Read easy books (graded readers)
2. No dictionaries
3. Skip any unknown words
4. Stop reading and get a new book if the book is difficult or boring
5. Read a given number of books or words (1 million words are suggested.)

In the SSS reading program, students are provided materials that are well within their comprehension level. This will allow the students to experience success and to revitalize their natural motivation to learn a new language. In the early stages of this process, there are no books that are too easy. However, we aggressively discourage students from reading books that are too difficult. The reason for this is that the students will revert to the practice of choosing books that are at the high end of their comprehension level. This would result in a lack of success, and the student will stop reading. This is due to the students’ past exposure to language programs which have focused on “i + 1” materials. Students have acquired the belief that materials must be difficult or are not useful. They must relearn that low-level materials will provide them with the success needed to continue interacting with the language. It is important to point out to students that it is better to read 10 easy books than it is to not read a difficult one.

Students are encouraged not to use dictionaries. This does not mean that they should not use dictionaries for any of their language exercises. However, when reading in the SSS program, the materials should be at a low enough level that a dictionary is not necessary. Furthermore, students will develop the skill of inferring meaning while reading. This will result in the acquisition of vocabulary as new words are encountered after a few times.

Skipping words allows the student to continue reading and too naturally acquire new vocabulary in context as a word is encountered multiple times.

If a student finds a book boring or too difficult, the student is encouraged to find more suitable material.

Students are provided with a goal in the number of words with the number of books read. Professor Sakai has recommended that the goal should be one million words. Students may find that such a goal may be overwhelming, so students can be given a lower beginning goal to insure initial success. Counting words provides data for determining an appropriate number of words that need to be read. Although publishers have been reluctant to provide the number of words in a particular book, the SEG website at: http://www.seg.co.jp/sss/information/SSSER-2006.htm has data on many graded readers.

A word is a word, but a book is not a book. That is to say that reading one book is not the same as reading another because of the number of words and the difficulty. However, students find it much easier to count the books that they have read, and I have found that for low level students this is an acceptable way of monitoring reading activity.

5. Production goals vs. process goals
Business and sports have long learned the value of implementing process goals. In sales for instance, sales representatives are provided guidelines on the number of sales calls that they must make per day or other process criteria for evaluating their activity. In manufacturing, the manufacturing process may be broken down into minutes or hundredths of a minute. Corporations have learned that by implementing these process goals for their employees, the employees focus on these goals and the result is that the production goal, or final goal, of sales or profit can be achieved.

In sports, let us consider the example of Tiger Woods, the golfer. Most would assume that Woods’ goal is to win golf tournaments. Furthermore, if Tiger Woods were being interviewed, he might tell the interviewer that ‘the winning of tournaments’ is his
goal. However, it is well known that Tiger Woods decided to relearn his golf swing after he began winning major tournaments. This shows that Woods clearly understood that the most important element for his future career was perfecting his golf swing. He understood that if he could perfect his golf swing, winning golf tournaments would be a natural result.

In education, we have been late in adopting process goals. We as teachers, often focus on what we might call the production goal of language acquisition, which is generally measured by a standardized test. As mentioned above, this focus on language acquisition leads us into the trap of providing our students with materials that are above their comprehension levels. This, in turn, results in the students’ inability to successfully interact using the target language and weakens students’ natural motivation.

6. The percentage of comprehensible study materials required
Many researchers, such as Krashen (1987) and Day, R. and Banford, J. (1998), have noted the need for study materials to be within the students’ area of comprehension. However, if such materials are required, what percentage of study materials should be within the students’ comprehension levels? This critical criterion is of utmost importance in making language programs successful, and yet, generally ignored or overlooked in teacher education.

When students are asked this question, they give answers that usually range from 50% to 90%. When informally asking the same question to teachers, the answers are not much different. I believe that the reason that teachers’ answers vary so widely is because of the almost universal acceptance and misapplication of Krashen’s Input Hypothesis and the perceived need to provide large amounts of material at the “i + 1” level.

Hu and Nation (2000) have shown that students need to understand 98% of the vocabulary of a reading passage for clear comprehension. Carver (1994) has stated that 99% is needed. The slight difference between the two studies underscores the point that teachers’ perceptions on the amount of comprehensible materials that are needed are more likely to be in the 10% to 40% range than in the slight differences offered by Hu and Nation (2000) and Carter (1994).

When teachers are in a coaching mode versus a teaching mode, teachers might consider making it a goal to use 100 percent of comprehensible material in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, low-level gaps in the students’ language ability will naturally provide items that will generally be at an “i + 1” level and easily learned. Furthermore, because of the interconnectedness of language, these newly learned low-level items may allow for acquisition of related items without additional effort. Clearly, the amount of new language items may change from class to class depending on the stage of language learning that the students are in. However, just as learning a musical instrument is a skill, language learning is a skill, and teachers should provide large amounts of material within the students’ level of comprehension so that the majority of the class time is spent allowing students to successfully interact using the language.

The SSS extensive reading program, by providing materials at the low end of the students’ comprehension levels, naturally provides materials that most would judge are within 100% of the students’ comprehension level and that students are not being exposed to any new material. However, because of the gaps we mentioned before, the students naturally encounter items that are unknown, but are at a relatively low linguistic level. This allows the students to learn these items quickly and naturally. Although the research that has been done in determining these percentages of materials required to be within the students’ comprehension levels has focused on reading, it
might be an interesting project to apply the same percentages of comprehension to the classroom. One distinct advantage is that the material would be well within the students’ comprehension level, and, by allowing the students to experience more success, teachers might overcome many of the motivational problems that they must deal with in the language classroom.

7. The effectiveness of the SSS extensive reading program
The SSS extensive reading program has shown some promising results. Nishizawa, et.al (2006) noted that students at a technical college improved their communication skills, increased their willingness to read children’s books and graded readers in English, improved their listening comprehension, began to think in English while reading rather than translating into Japanese and, for the first time, surpassed the TOEIC scores of students at some regular universities.

Table 1. Pre-test and post-test TOEIC scores of two students using the SSS extensive reading program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student 1</th>
<th>TOEIC Scores</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student 2</th>
<th>TOEIC Scores</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>2006</td>
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</tbody>
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Perhaps due to stress. Student needed 700 to qualify for a scholarship.

15 months on the reading program; Read approximately 1,800,000 words.

8. Conclusion
Although there seems to be universal knowledge among teachers about Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, it appears that this knowledge, rather than improving language education, may be detrimental. Students have gaps at relatively low levels in their language abilities. Thus, as teachers endeavor to provide materials at students’ unknown “i + 1” levels, the material is often at the “i + 2” level or higher. The result is that language acquisition cannot take place, and there is a possibility that because of this lack of success, students are losing their natural motivation to study.

In the Start with Simple Stories extensive reading program (SSS), students are encouraged to read graded readers at the low end of their language abilities. The result
is that students are able to read with fluency from the beginning. In addition, because of their success in reading in the target language, students are rediscovering their natural motivation toward learning and are able to interact with and through the language for a longer period of time. This allows students to get the increased exposure to the language that is needed for acquisition. As many researchers have found, language acquisition is a natural result of exposure to large amounts of comprehensible study material. The SSS extensive reading program may provide a framework in which this can actually happen.

References