Transcript

Welcome to Easy Stories in English, the podcast that will take your English from OK to Good, and from Good to Great.

I am Ariel Goodbody, your host for this show. Today's episode is for pre-intermediate learners. The name of the episode is *How to Learn a Language*. You can find a transcript of the episode at EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Learn. That's EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Learn. There, you can also download the episode as a PDF.

Today's episode is something different from usual. Today, I'm going to tell you my process for writing an episode of *Easy Stories in English*. A **process** is the way something is done. I'm going to tell you my process for making the podcast and the best way to learn a language in general.

Why? Well, I realised that I have thought a lot about the theory behind the podcast, but I have never shared it with you listeners. Hopefully, this episode will help you better understand how to study languages, and if you are a language teacher, how to teach better!

Around the time I first started the podcast, I was reading a lot of research about second language acquisition. A **second language** is a language that you learn after your first language, your native language. So my first language, for example, is English, and French is my second language. Technically, you can have third, fourth, fifth languages and so on, but we often use 'second language' to talk about all languages you learn after your first.

Acquisition means acquiring, getting something. In this context, it means 'learning'. So second language acquisition is the study of how we learn languages. You might be thinking, 'Why do you use the word "acquisition", then? Why not just say "second language learning"?'

Well, that's because we learn languages in a different way to other things. Usually, when we hear the word 'learning' we think of reading books, studying and memorisation. **Memorise** means to make yourself remember something. For example, when my parents were at school they had to memorise poems, so that they could say the poems without reading them off the page.

But languages are not like that. You can't just memorise all the parts of a language. This is because the skill to acquire a language is innate. When something is **innate**, it means we have it from birth. We aren't born *speaking* a language, but everyone is born able to *acquire* one, so we know that language acquisition is an innate process. We listen to the language around us, people communicate with us, and so we acquire our first language. How we acquire our first language hasn't really changed much in human history, because it works.

What doesn't work so well is language *teaching*, at least for most people. Think of your language classes at school. How many students spoke the language well after years of classes? How many students continued to learn after leaving school?

Language teaching is mostly still the same as in Roman times. For thousands of years, we've understood that there is a list of grammar rules that you learn, then you fill in the gaps with vocabulary, and bam! You're speaking a language. Except that doesn't usually happen, does it?

Now, some of you might have enjoyed this way of teaching. Some people have brains that understand grammar very well. I'm one of those annoying people myself. But you probably still studied English for years without feeling like you could actually *speak* it.

In the 1970s a linguist called Stephen Krashen had a hypothesis. A **hypothesis** is an idea in science that someone is trying to prove. For example, there is a famous story about

Isaac Newton. Apparently, an apple fell on Isaac Newton's head, and that inspired him to create a hypothesis. His hypothesis was that things are pulled towards the earth, the ground. This hypothesis became the theory of gravity.

Stephen Krashen's hypothesis was this: we learn languages by communicating and understanding messages. He called this the **theory of comprehensible input**. **Comprehensible** means 'easy to understand', and **input** is information that you put into something. For example, when you press a button on your computer, that is input: it tells the computer to do something. When I speak into the microphone, that is also input. The microphone uses sound as input and records it.

Stephen Krashen believed that we acquire language by receiving **input** – reading and listening – that is **comprehensible** – easy to understand. In other words, we learn language when people speak to us in a way we can understand, when we read books we can understand, when we listen to podcasts we can understand – hmm, maybe like this one! – and so on.

In one of his talks, Stephen Krashen gives an example of an experience that inspired his theory. He was working as director of English as a second language at a university in New York in the 1970s. Next door to his apartment lived a family who had recently moved from Japan. So of course, he tried teaching English to one of the children, a four-year-old girl called Hitomi. How did he do this? He encouraged Hitomi to practise speaking.

First, he told her phrases to say – 'Do you like that ball?'. But she said nothing. Next, he gave her the words to say – 'Ball. Say ball'. She said nothing. So then he broke down the words into individual sounds – 'buh ah luh luh. Ball'. Still, she said nothing. He tried making a **deal** with her – making an agreement with her – saying things like, 'I won't give you the ball until you say the word "ball".' By now, you can probably guess that this *didn't* work.

Then, five months later, Hitomi started to speak. By the end of the year, Hitomi could speak almost as well as the other kids her age in the neighbourhood.

So what happened? In those five months when Hitomi was silent, it *seemed* like she wasn't learning. But she was. She was listening. She was understanding things in context. She was acquiring language through comprehensible input.

Now, you may be thinking, 'Hey, I spend lots of time watching TV shows in English, and it's taken me a lot longer than five months to be able to speak!'

Well, think of it this way: in those five months that Hitomi was in New York, she was surrounded by English all day, every day. And because she was a child, people would be trying to make things easy for her to understand.

For those five months, that silent period, Hitomi wasn't speaking, but she was acquiring. And importantly, she *was* communicating. When people talked to her in English, she didn't just stand there and do nothing. She told people when she understood and when she didn't, and she could answer simple questions. How? The same way we all do as children: by making facial expressions – like smiling or looking confused – and using body language. When she was ready, she spoke, and her speaking improved very quickly.

Since Krashen published his theory in the 1970s, many other researchers have criticised him. **Researchers** are scientists who do research, who create and test new hypotheses in science. Researchers often **criticise** each other – they say that someone else's theory is wrong, that the answer is different. And many researchers in second language acquisition have criticised Krashen's idea of comprehensible input.

However, almost all second language acquisition researchers basically agree with Krashen. Often, they call comprehensible input something different, or they consider it part of a wider idea, for example 'implicit versus explicit learning'. And there is a *lot* of research

that supports Krashen's theory. In 2021, two researchers, Karen Lichtman and Bill VanPatten, said that comprehensible input is not a hypothesis – it is a fact.

And I agree! While teaching, I've seen so many students who hate learning languages, who find it scary, who have spent years studying vocabulary lists but still feel uncomfortable speaking to a native speaker. On the other hand, when I taught them using comprehensible input – stories, games, conversations and so on – they started to change. They grew more confident, and they began to use the language without thinking about it.

So when I started *Easy Stories in English*, I used Krashen's theory to guide me. As I said earlier, other researchers have added ideas to Krashen's work, and there is lots of important research on second language acquisition that has happened since the 1970s. However, Krashen's theory is a great introduction to this topic, and I think it is the clearest way to talk about these ideas.

If I was teaching this as a class in university, I would talk more about other researchers, but this really is an *introduction* to the topic. If you are interested and want to learn more, I've put a **bibliography** – a list of books and articles I used to help write this episode – I've put a bibliography under the transcript at EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Learn.

Today's episode is quite scientific, so if you are finding it hard to follow, make sure to take lots of breaks. In fact, why not take a break now? Go get a cup of tea, go to the toilet, or get some food. I'll see you in a bit!

[break]

So, the theory of comprehensible input is made up of five hypotheses. I'm going to explain each of the five hypotheses. Then, I'll tell you how they helped me design *Easy Stories in English*.

The first hypothesis is the **input hypothesis**. The input hypothesis states – **state** is just a formal way of saying 'say' – the input hypothesis states that people learn language when they understand input that is slightly above their current level, their level right now.

You might remember in a previous episode I did, *Why You Must Read*, I talked about reading books where you understand 98% of the words on the page. This is an example of the input hypothesis used practically. We learn best when we understand almost all of the text or audio, but there is a small part that is new. Often, we can **figure out** what the new thing means – we can understand or guess what the new thing means – because of the context around it.

The input hypothesis is often written as 'i+1'. This is a mathematical way of understanding it. 'i' means 'interlanguage', the form of language that the learner has acquired so far, and '+1' is the new information that is being added. If you add too many new elements, for example you read a book where you only understand 50% of the words on the page, you will get tired and confused quickly, and you won't learn as well. So it's 'i+1' and not 'i+20'!

Many researchers criticised this hypothesis and said that this was unclear. What is 'i' and what is '1'? However, all popular theories of second language acquisition since the 1970s have agreed with this idea in general. They disagree about what happens in the brain *after* the comprehensible input, but they agree that it is necessary.

Another important thing to add is that input needs to be *comprehensible*, but it also needs to be *communicative*. Remember the example of Hitomi earlier? Hitomi was surrounded by children and adults who wanted to communicate with her. She was not learning English from a teacher who only talked about grammar. For language to be acquired, there needs to be communication in the classroom, and for communication to work, there needs to be a goal.

That's why I teach using stories. Creating stories and telling stories has a clear communicative goal. Often that goal is just having fun! Examples of other communicative goals are are learning more about the students in the class, discussing serious issues or working on a project together.

If you're learning by yourself, you might think that reading books and listening to podcasts isn't 'communication', but it is! I'm communicating a message with my stories, and when you read them, you are thinking about what they mean and whether you like them. That is an important form of communication.

The second hypothesis is the **acquisition–learning hypothesis**. I talked earlier about the difference between acquisition and learning. Basically, learning is a *conscious* process – **conscious** means you know when you are doing it – and acquisition is a *subconscious* process – when something is **subconscious** you don't realise it's happening. So learning might be studying grammar rules, and acquisition might be understanding the meaning of the word 'ball' by meeting it in lots of different contexts.

The acquisition–learning hypothesis states that we *only* improve our language skills through acquisition. Of course, this is controversial – when something is **controversial**, many people argue about whether it is true or not.

Why is it controversial to say that we only improve our language skills through acquisition? Well, it depends on what you think language *is*. Is language a list of grammar rules and vocabulary, like you see in textbooks? That is the traditional way of understanding language. And if you think language is just a list of rules, then it is better to teach the rules, even when you are using comprehensible input as well.

But there is plenty of research that shows that language is a lot more abstract than this. When something is **abstract**, it means that it is not simple and clear. For example, abstract paintings can be very beautiful, but when you look at an abstract painting, it is usually very hard to tell what it is. Is that a person? A field? A cow? Or just a bunch of colours? It's too abstract to understand.

Researchers such as Bill VanPatten say that the language we have inside our brains is *very* abstract. It's quite difficult to test abstract knowledge scientifically, but it is possible. I won't get into the details because it's quite complicated, but there are ways to test for subconscious knowledge of a language, and now we can even use machines that look at people's brains while they use language.

In my own experience, I can usually tell when a student has mainly used conscious learning instead of subconscious acquisition. In the past, I have had students who learned through an app like Duolingo, which mainly uses conscious learning. Often, they didn't really listen to what I said and understood very little. Then, when *they* wanted to speak, they looked in the air, said 'um' and spent a long time trying to find the right word. It was like their brain had put the words in a 'box of facts' and not in the 'box of language'.

Stephen Krashen's third hypothesis is the **monitor hypothesis**. The idea is that we have a monitor, which allows us to listen to our own language use and change it. For example, when you write a document, you use your monitor to check the grammar and spelling. When you speak in front of an audience, you use your monitor to make sure you are saying the right words. Basically, the monitor is the little voice inside our heads that helps us speak and write better.

The monitor hypothesis states that consciously-learned language can only be used to monitor our **output** – our speaking and writing – *after* we've already said or written it, but the original speech and writing comes only from our subconsciously acquired language.

Think of it this way: maybe you find the present perfect tense really hard in English. I know a lot of learners do. So you study all the rules, learn how to make the tense and what situations to use it in. But often you say something and then only realise afterwards that you should have used the present perfect tense. Or you know *when* to use the tense but form it incorrectly.

These are examples of using your monitor. Until you get enough input in English – until you read and listen enough in English – you won't be able to naturally use the present perfect tense because you have only *learned* it, not acquired it.

This idea is hard for many people to understand. What it means is, if there's one area of grammar that you find really hard, you should *not* go and study the rules. Instead, you should keep reading and listening to things that are at the right level – the 'i+1' level – for you, and then you will acquire it without realising.

When you learn a language in the classroom, there's a lot of focus on speaking and writing 'correctly', so you learn to have your monitor on *all the time*. For some students, this creates big problems. They find that they can never relax in a conversation. They're always worried about making mistakes, and so they have less energy to understand the person they're speaking to.

So if you can, please switch off your monitor! Find people who don't correct your grammar and who make you feel confident while speaking.

Stephen Krashen's fourth hypothesis is the **natural order hypothesis**. The natural order hypothesis states that all learners acquire certain things in a specific order. Interestingly, the natural order of grammar acquisition is quite different from what people expect. The grammar that we often think is 'simple' is sometimes acquired much later than other grammar points.

For example, in English, we add an -s to the end of verbs in the third person singular of the present tense. For example, we say 'I walk' but 'he walk***s***'. This is quite a strange rule, because verbs don't change like this otherwise in English. And research shows that in first language acquisition and second language acquisition, this grammar point is acquired *very* late on.

However, most teachers of English think this is a 'simple' rule, so they spend lots of time teaching it and correcting students' mistakes at an early level. This wastes time and makes students feel bad for not understanding something 'simple', when actually it's one of the last things native speakers acquire as well! If you think of language as a list of rules, then it makes sense to teach this way, but if you believe that language is *abstract*, then this doesn't make sense.

Since Krashen's original theory, research has shown that this idea is true, and that actually, there is a natural order for many parts of language. This is sometimes called 'ordered development'. The order can change a bit depending on your native language, but it mostly stays the same.

Finally, Stephen Krashen's fifth hypothesis is the **affective filter hypothesis**. **Affective** with an 'A' means 'related to feelings or emotions'. A **filter** is something that you use to keep some things out but take some things in. For example, you might use an air filter to keep some things in the air, like oxygen – oxygen is very important for us to live! – but to take out things like dead skin and pollen, which make the quality of the air worse.

The affective filter hypothesis states that when a learner has **negative emotions** – bad feelings – like anxiety, nervousness or boredom, the negative emotions create a filter which makes acquiring language harder. If you're having fun while learning English, and you feel relaxed, you're going to understand a lot more of the language. But if you're bored, hungry or

scared that you'll say something wrong, you'll understand less language. Those negative emotions create a filter that stops the language from coming in.

Therefore, it is very important for language classes and language resources to create positive feelings. Correcting students for making mistakes, in my experience, mainly creates negative emotions. And over time, students can build up a strong affective filter. I've had students who are so nervous that as soon as they don't understand one word, they **panic** – they get anxious – and then they cannot understand anything.

So, these are the five hypotheses that make up Stephen Krashen's theory of comprehensible input! I'll just remind you of what they are, then we'll take a break, and when we come back, I'll explain how I use them to make *Easy Stories in English*.

The five hypotheses are:

- the input hypothesis: that we acquire language best when it is just a bit above our current level, or 'i+1';
- the acquisition–learning hypothesis: that subconsciously acquired language and consciously learned language are separate and improvement comes only from acquisition;
- the monitor hypothesis: that consciously learned language can only be used to monitor our output – our speaking and writing – and not to actually speak and write;
- the natural order hypothesis: that all learners acquire language in a certain order;
- and the affective filter hypothesis: that negative emotions can create a filter which makes acquiring language harder.

That was a lot, huh? Your brain must be hurting now. So let's take another break. You could even go and sleep for a bit, or come back to this episode another day. Don't worry, I'll still be here!

[break]

In the past, when I taught English to groups, the issue always was: how do I make myself comprehensible to all these people? It's the same question I had when I started *Easy Stories in English*.

I already knew how to make my classes and my podcast *fun* – with stories, of course! This isn't an original idea of mine. There is a language-teaching method called TPRS – Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling – which uses storytelling and theatre to teach languages.

But when you teach in a real-life classroom, there are many ways to make yourself comprehensible. You can draw pictures, make gestures with your hands and translate individual words. Plus, students can tell you when they don't understand, and then you can explain. Often, students come from similar language backgrounds, so you can use words you know they'll understand. For example, if I'm teaching Spanish students, I know they'll probably understand the word 'comprehensible' because it's similar to the Spanish word 'comprensible'. These words are called **cognates**, by the way. Another example of an English-Spanish cognate is 'nation' and 'nación'.

But with a podcast, you can't use pictures or gestures! And I wanted the podcast to be useful for listeners around the world, so I didn't want to use the cognate method or translation. So I had two main ways to make myself comprehensible: I could explain the meanings of words and, sometimes, use sound to explain the meaning. That's why I decided to use four levels – beginner, pre-intermediate, intermediate and advanced – to divide up the stories.

Fortunately, there is a fantastic resource called EnglishProfile, which tells you what words belong to what language level. They used **data** – information – they used data from

English-language exams around the world to decide which words were ‘beginner words’, which were ‘intermediate words’ and so on. They used the levels from the Common European Framework of Reference, or CEFR. You might have heard of the CEFR before. It has six levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2.

The beginner-level episodes of *Easy Stories in English* are A2-level, the pre-intermediate episodes are B1, the intermediate episodes are B2 and the advanced stories are C1-level. I decided to not do A1 or C2, because A1 is very hard to teach without using translation, drawing pictures and so on, and when you’re at C2-level, you can usually start using resources that native speakers would use; for example, reading *Harry Potter* or watching the TV show *Friends*.

Every time I write a new story, I decide what level it’s going to be, and then I use the EnglishProfile vocabulary lists to make sure that all the words in the story are at the same level or from a lower level. I also try to include around ten ‘new words’, which I explain the meaning of at the start of the episode. These are always words from a higher level.

So when I write a beginner-level story, I try to only use A2 and A1-level words. But maybe I want to use the word ‘smile’, which is a B1-level word. Then I will make sure to introduce ‘smile’ earlier in the episode and explain its meaning. This is following Stephen Krashen’s input hypothesis: ‘i+1’.

Following the acquisition–learning hypothesis, *Easy Stories in English* focusses on *only* providing comprehensible input. I almost never talk about grammar on here, and I teach words in context.

The monitor hypothesis doesn’t affect my podcast very much, as I can’t stop you from using your monitor when you’re speaking and writing! But my hope is that the easily-comprehensible stories will help you relax over time and use your monitor less.

Similarly, I try to make the stories as fun as possible so that you don’t get an affective filter when learning English, or, if you already *do* get very nervous about English, my fun, relaxed style will help with that. Many listeners have told me that they listen to the podcast before bed, or that they tell the stories to their children. This is fantastic – you’re having so much fun, you’ve forgotten that you’re supposed to be ‘learning’!

Finally, following the natural order hypothesis, I don’t worry about ‘grammar levels’. Instead, I try to make the lower-level stories less grammatically *complicated*. I do this by using shorter sentences and making more direct references. Let me give you an example.

In an advanced story I might say: *George took off his hat and sat down at the table. There was lots of delicious food there, which was good, because he was hungry.*

In a beginner-level story I would say: *George took off his hat and sat down at the table. There was lots of delicious food on the table. That was good, because George was hungry.*

See how I said ‘on the table’ instead of ‘there’, and ‘George’ instead of ‘he’? This is less complicated, so it takes less time for our brain to understand. As you get more comprehensible input, you become more comfortable with the language, and your brain can understand it more quickly. That’s why you can understand much more complicated sentences at higher levels.

Traditional language teaching doesn’t understand grammar in this way. Instead, teachers say that there are ‘beginner-level grammar points’ and ‘advanced grammar points’.

The passive construction is a grammar point that is usually considered advanced. An example of the passive construction is saying ‘The office was built’ instead of ‘They built the office’.

If you believe that language is abstract, then this doesn’t make sense. And this idea of ‘grammar levels’ is terrible for communication and telling stories. For example, some

language teachers only teach the present tense for the first year of classes, because they think the past tense is more 'advanced' than the present tense. So for a whole year, you can only talk about things happening *right now!* You can't talk about anything that happened in the past.

I don't know about you, but I can't tell stories that way! Sometimes I *need* those 'advanced grammar points' in my beginner-level stories. And to enjoy a story, you only need to understand the meaning of what is happening. If you don't know all the little pieces of grammar yet, that's fine. You will acquire them later after seeing the grammar enough times.

OK, this is all sounding quite abstract, so let me give an example. I'm going to give you three sentences. They are all talking about a similar idea, but they start with 'simple grammar' and go up to 'advanced grammar'. However, I have changed one of the words to a made-up word – a word that is not real. See if you can understand.

I blonkied the cake and she arrived.

I had just blonkied the cake when she arrived.

She's already here, but don't worry, the cake has been blonkied.

Did you understand the meaning of the first sentence better than the third? Maybe a bit, but you're still not sure what 'blonky' means. But if I say:

I cleaned up the cake and she arrived.

I had just cleaned up the cake when she arrived.

She's already here, but don't worry, the cake has been cleaned up.

…then you probably understood quite well! It doesn't matter that I used 'higher-level grammar' in the second and third sentences – you probably understood those sentences a *lot* better than the blonky ones! So that's why I focus on teaching *words* and not grammar points.

Phew. So that's it. That's Stephen Krashen's theory of comprehensible input, and that's why I do the podcast the way I do. Well done for listening to all of this – you now understand language acquisition better than most people! You now understand language acquisition better than a lot of teachers. Now, when you want to improve your English or pick up another language, you can have more fun and acquire language much faster. And if you're a teacher, hopefully this has given you lots to think about!

If you're thinking, 'timeThis is all great! But where can I find good comprehensible resources for learning languages?', I recommend you sign up for my email newsletter at EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Email. When you sign up, you get a free PDF with my top 10 language learning advice, and I'll email you every time there's a new episode of the podcast. You can even sign up, get the PDF, and unsubscribe. Really, I don't mind!

Of course, you might also be thinking, 'But Ariel, I love studying grammar!' And that's fine. Do what you find fun and what you can keep doing for a long time. As long as you're still improving, that's all that matters.

On the other hand, if this episode has **sparked an interest** in you – when something sparks an interest, you become very interested in something new – if this episode has sparked an interest for second language acquisition theory, then I recommend you listen to my episode *Why You Must Read*, where I talk more about research into reading and language acquisition. You can listen to *Why You Must Read* at EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Read.

If you're curious about what teaching using comprehensible input looks like, I've put some YouTube videos at the bottom of today's transcript at EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Learn. There's even some of my own teaching in there!

I'm going to do another episode soon called *How to Teach a Language*, which will give advice for people who want to teach a language to a friend or partner. I know many people speak less commonly-studied languages, such as Slovak or Sesotho, and have a partner who wants to learn it. Actually, I've been teaching Esperanto to my girlfriend, and I'm going to talk more about that in the episode *How to Teach a Language* and give lots of practical advice.

I'm also organising a comprehensible input teaching workshop with my friend and fellow Esperanto teacher, Tim Morley. The event is going to be next year and it is called CI Sleepover. You can go to comprehensible.uk to sign up and find out more information.

I would love to hear your questions and comments on today's episode, so come over to EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Learn and leave a comment below the transcript. I've also put the bibliography there, as I mentioned before.

If you enjoyed the story and want to say thank you, you can buy me a coffee. Just go to EasyStoriesInEnglish.com and click the orange button that says *Buy me a coffee!* Or you can write me a nice review on Apple Podcasts, or follow me on Instagram @arielgoodbody. Thank you for listening, and see you in two weeks!

Bibliography

Videos

Examples of comprehensible-input teaching

A playlist of talks and interviews with Stephen Krashen

A series of introductory talks about language teaching by researcher Bill VanPatten

Books and Articles

Fluency through TPR storytelling: achieving real language acquisition in school
Authors: Blaine Ray, Contee Seeley
ISBN: 9780929724218

While We're on the Topic: BVP on Language, Acquisition, and Classroom Practice
Author: Bill VanPatten
ISBN: 9781942544579

Was Krashen right? Forty years later
Authors: Karen Lichtman, Bill VanPatten
DOI: 10.1111/flan.12552

Stephen Krashen posts many of his books and research for free on his website. The level is more academic but easier than many academic writers.

Podcasts

Tea with BVP

A talk show where language teachers call in and ask questions to professors of second-language acquisition.

The Motivated Classroom

Growing with Proficiency: the Podcast

Groups and Conferences

Many CI and TPRS teachers use Facebook to communicate. Here are some groups I recommend:
CI Liftoff
iFLT/ NTPRS/ CI Teaching
Find out more about CI Sleepover, a workshop I will be running with my friend Tim Morley in 2024
Additionally, I strongly recommend the Agen TPRS Workshop, which takes place in the south of France every year