11

Pure Optimal Unified Input (P.O.U.I.): Clarifying the Conditions for Language Acquisition

Beniko Mason
Shitennoji University Junior College, Japan
benikomaon@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper presents Pure Optimal Unified Input (P.O.U.I.) as the outcome of more than forty years of classroom teaching and research inspired by the Input Hypothesis. It asks what conditions allow learners to develop another language effectively and efficiently, with as little unnecessary burden as possible. P.O.U.I. proposes that input should be **Optimal**—comprehensible, compelling, rich, and abundant; **Pure**—provided without requiring conscious study, memorization, practice, correction, or forced output; and **Unified**—combining Story-Listening (SL) and Guided Self-Selected Reading (GSSR) as complementary and mutually supportive sources of input. Classroom research on vocabulary retention, reading development, standardized-test performance, and efficiency is reviewed in relation to these claims. The paper argues that instructional activities should be evaluated not simply by whether they produce improvement, but by how much lasting language development they produce for the time and effort learners invest. It concludes that a central goal of language education is to help learners become independent readers who can continue developing language, knowledge, and thought beyond the classroom. It also considers the broader curricular implication of the **Input Hypothesis**: if Optimal Input is sufficient for acquisition, Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading need not be additions to a conventional language curriculum but can constitute the curriculum itself.
Keywords: Pure Optimal Unified Input (P.O.U.I.); Optimal Input; Story-Listening; Guided Self-Selected Reading; comprehensible input; language acquisition; reading

1. The Question I Stayed With

When I first encountered the Input Hypothesis, I was struck by a proposition that was radically different from conventional language teaching: we acquire language by understanding messages. More radically, the hypothesis proposed that comprehensible input alone was sufficient for language acquisition.

If input alone could provide a way for students to acquire another language effectively and without the burden of conventional language study, the implications for language education would be enormous. This became the question I stayed with.

I had begun using graded readers with my students in 1984, before I fully understood the theoretical basis for what I was doing. After hearing Stephen Krashen speak in the fall of that year, I began reading his work (Krashen, 1982, 1985a, 1985b) and tried to bring my teaching more closely into line with the Input Hypothesis. My early comparisons of Extensive Reading (ER) with Intensive Reading (IR) were conducted in the late 1980s, although the results did not appear in print until 1997.

Learners who read comprehensible graded readers made greater gains than learners engaged in conventional grammar-translation work for approximately the same amount of

outside-class time (Mason & Krashen, 1997b). Reluctant learners who read graded readers not only improved their English but also became more willing to read (Mason & Krashen, 1997a).

At that time, however, my understanding of how comprehensible input could be used in the classroom was still developing. I remained concerned about accountability and required students to write summaries of the books they read and, for a time, to retell the stories to study partners. I had not yet begun to ask whether such additional requirements were necessary for acquisition.

I then began asking not simply which approach was more effective, but which was more efficient. If learners could make twice as much progress in the same amount of time, that difference mattered. The important question became: How much development do learners achieve for the time and effort they invest? In one comparison, learners who remained in Japan and read books increased their TOEFL scores at approximately the same rate as international students enrolled in intensive English programs in the United States, but with considerably less instructional time, effort, and expense (Mason, 2006; Swinton, 1983).

The evidence for reading became increasingly convincing. Students who read abundantly, choosing books they could understand and enjoy, made substantial gains on standardized tests. There seemed little doubt that comprehensible input through reading was a highly efficient way to promote language development. But another problem became apparent.

In my classes, the learners who appeared to benefit most tended to be those who already had sufficient English competence to read comfortably, were already readers in Japanese, or were willing to try an unfamiliar approach to developing their English. They were ready for ER. Many others were not. Although some students discovered the pleasure of reading, many would probably not pick up another English book after graduation.

This changed the question for me. It was no longer enough to show that reading worked for learners who were ready and willing to read. Conventional instruction also worked for some learners. If comprehensible input is the cause of language acquisition and is sufficient for acquisition, the important question was why it did not appear to work equally well for everyone. I began to ask what qualities input needed to have, and under what conditions it needed to be provided, for acquisition to occur effectively and efficiently for most learners.

I noticed that many learners did not yet have enough acquired competence to read easily and enjoyably. I therefore began adding auditory input to the reading program. Story-Listening (SL) eventually became a way to provide rich, comprehensible spoken input through stories, while also developing learners' curiosity about stories and helping them move toward enjoyable, independent reading.

Together, Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading (GSSR) became complementary sources of input in what I now call **Pure Optimal Unified Input (P.O.U.I.).**

P.O.U.I. is where more than forty years of following this question through classroom teaching and research have brought me.

2. From *i+1* to Optimal Input

In the Input Hypothesis, *i* represents the learner's current acquired competence, while *i+1* represents language that goes beyond that competence but becomes understandable as part of a comprehensible message.

The +1 should not be understood as one predetermined "next rule." A meaningful message contains vocabulary, grammatical forms, expressions, collocations, discourse patterns, and many other features of language. Different learners listening to the same story may therefore be ready to acquire different things because their developing systems are different.

The +1 does not stand alone. It is carried by the i.

New language becomes understandable through what the learner already understands. Understanding is not simply a matter of being supplied with a meaning. A translation, for example, may allow a learner to identify the meaning of an unfamiliar word at that moment, but this does not necessarily mean that the word has become part of the learner's acquired system. For acquisition, new language must be encountered as part of a meaningful message, supported by what the learner already understands.

The teacher therefore does not need to identify each learner's particular +1 and teach it directly. Rich input can contain many potential +1s. The teacher's responsibility is to make the message understandable; the learner's developing system determines what is ready to be acquired.

This also means that simply calling input "comprehensible" does not tell us enough. Not all comprehensible input is of equal value (Krashen & Mason, 2020). Input can be comprehensible but uninteresting, linguistically impoverished, repetitive, or insufficient in quantity. If we want optimal outcomes, we must consider the quality and quantity of the input.

Optimal Input is **comprehensible, compelling, rich, and abundant**. It must be comprehensible enough for learners to follow the message, compelling enough to keep their attention on meaning, rich enough to provide continuing opportunities for development, and abundant enough to cast a wide net of language. In Story-Listening, this abundance comes not only from the story itself but also from the linguistic supplementation used to make the story comprehensible. Synonyms, paraphrases, explanations, and other naturally occurring language provide a broad range of language that is already familiar to learners together with language they are ready to acquire.

Without Optimal Input, we cannot reasonably expect an optimal outcome.

3. Making Rich Input Comprehensible

Story-Listening developed as one way of providing such input. The teacher tells an interesting story using Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation (CAS), including drawings, gestures, facial expressions, familiar words, synonyms, paraphrases, and brief first-language support when needed (Krashen, Mason, & Smith, 2018).

An important distinction is between non-linguistic and linguistic supplementation. Non-linguistic supplementation—such as drawings, gestures, and facial expressions—can help learners follow the story and understand what is happening. These are comprehensible signs, but comprehensible signs are not the same as comprehensible linguistic input. When meaning is understood entirely through non-linguistic supplementation, learners may understand what is happening without necessarily understanding the unfamiliar target language they hear.

Linguistic supplementation—such as familiar target-language words, synonyms, and paraphrases—uses language that learners already understand to make less familiar language

comprehensible. In this way, learners encounter new language within a broad network of familiar language and language they are ready to acquire.

This distinction is important because the goal is not simply for learners to understand what happens in the story, but to understand the story through the target language.
For beginners, however, there may initially be very little acquired target language available to support comprehension. Story-Listening therefore begins with very short, simple stories, with non-linguistic supplementation such as drawings and gestures playing an important role in establishing meaning. As learners' acquired competence develops, increasingly rich language can be made comprehensible, and more of the support can come from language they already understand. In this way, the learner's developing *i* can increasingly carry the new language they are ready to acquire.

4. Why "Pure"?

Language classes usually combine comprehensible input with vocabulary study, grammar explanation, memorization, exercises, output practice, correction, and other activities. When learners improve under such instruction, however, it is difficult to determine which component contributed to the improvement—comprehensible input, conscious learning, or both.

We can represent the question simply as: **i versus i + S** where **i** represents Optimal Input and **S** represents conscious skill-building activities.

"Pure" does not mean that we can control what learners think or do while receiving input or outside the classroom. It refers to what the instructional approach requires of them.
It means that instruction does not require conscious study, memorization, practice, correction, or forced output, allowing us to examine what happens when learners receive Optimal Input without these additional instructional activities.

My research has repeatedly led me to question the contribution of **S**. In comparisons between learners receiving input-focused instruction and learners receiving conventional instruction that combined input with conscious study and practice, the input-focused learners achieved as much or more for the time they invested.

In some studies, they achieved substantially more. These findings do not demonstrate that **S** can never contribute to acquisition. They do show that, in these comparisons, the instruction that included S was not more efficient. Moreover, S may not simply add unnecessary demands; it may interfere with the process of language acquisition.
There may, of course, be other reasons for studying grammar, memorizing vocabulary, practicing output, or learning explicitly about language. The claim of P.O.U.I. is more specific. If our goal is efficient language acquisition for a wide range of learners, including reluctant learners—not only those who succeed under instruction emphasizing conscious learning—we need to ask whether these additional activities are necessary. Do they help learners acquire more language for the time, effort, and cost involved? And if standardized test scores are considered important, do these activities lead to greater gains on those tests? Traditional activities should not be assumed to be necessary simply because they have long been part of language instruction. Their additional contribution must be demonstrated in comparison with Pure Optimal Unified Input alone.

There is also another outcome that standardized test scores do not fully capture. Input-focused instruction can be more pleasant for learners and can help them discover the pleasure

of reading. When learners become readers who continue reading after instruction ends, the benefits continue beyond the end of the course. They gain access not only to continuing language input, but also to knowledge, ideas, and experiences through reading throughout their lives.

The Input Hypothesis makes a more radical prediction: if comprehensible input is sufficient for language acquisition, then conscious study, memorization, practice, correction, and forced output should not be necessary for acquisition. P.O.U.I. takes this prediction seriously by asking what happens when learners are given Optimal Input without requiring these additional activities.

5. Why "Unified"?

Story-Listening can provide rich and powerful input, but there are practical limits to how much spoken input any individual teacher can provide. Classroom time is limited, and the language available through Story-Listening is also necessarily limited by the vocabulary and linguistic resources of the individual storyteller. This may be particularly important when the teacher is a non-native speaker of the target language. Reading opens access to a far greater range and quantity of language than any individual teacher can provide and eventually allows learners to continue receiving Optimal Input independently.

Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading therefore function not only as complementary sources of Optimal Input, but also as mutually supportive ones. Through Story-Listening, learners become familiar with the characters, events, and meaning of a story before encountering it in written form. When they later read the story, much of the message is already familiar, making the written language easier to comprehend. In this way, SL can give learners access to texts that might otherwise be difficult for them to read independently. Reading, in turn, gives learners access to a range and quantity of language that Story-Listening alone cannot provide.

The **G** in GSSR is important (Mason, 2019). Guidance is possible because the teacher receives continuing information about each learner's comprehension and reading experience. After Story-Listening, learners write a summary in their first language, and for each book they read, they submit a reading log. These provide the teacher with information that can be used to guide learners toward books that are likely to be both comprehensible and interesting. As learners gain reading experience and learn what kinds of books work for them, they become increasingly able to choose successfully for themselves.

SL and GSSR are not separate stages in which reading replaces listening. They can continue together. Learners may read the same story after hearing it, but they do not have to. Nor is the purpose of reading after listening to practice or memorize the language of the story. Listening and reading provide continuing opportunities to understand new messages through language.

As learners become stronger readers, they can obtain increasingly large amounts of Optimal Input for themselves. Eventually, they need the teacher less. They become independent readers.

This is the meaning of **Unified** in P.O.U.I.: Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading form a continuing stream of comprehensible, compelling, rich, and abundant input.

The teacher can provide what learners cannot yet obtain easily for themselves through Story-Listening, while GSSR gradually opens the way to quantities of input that no classroom teacher could provide alone.

P.O.U.I. does not end when learners become independent readers or reach an advanced level. As their competence grows, learners can read increasingly complex and varied texts and obtain much larger amounts of Optimal Input for themselves. At the same time, they can continue to benefit from Story-Listening, including literary and classic stories appropriate for mature and advanced learners. An advanced reader can therefore continue to be a Story-Listening learner. What changes is not the principle of P.O.U.I., but the level and range of the input and the amount of guidance the learner needs. Listening and reading can continue together throughout the learner's development.

6. What Does the Evidence Show?

My classroom research has examined the results of input in several ways: vocabulary acquisition and retention, acquisition and forgetting rates, reading development, cloze-test gains, standardized-test performance, and efficiency.

One important finding concerns retention. Deliberate vocabulary learning can produce high immediate scores because learners know what they are expected to remember. Delayed tests, however, can reveal substantial forgetting. Vocabulary acquired through Story-Listening shows a different pattern: immediate gains may be smaller, but more of what has been gained can remain over time (Mason & Ae, 2025; Mason & Bucol, 2025). Immediate learning and lasting acquisition should therefore not be treated as the same thing.

Efficiency comparisons provide another kind of evidence. In one study, English majors received approximately 126 hours of English instruction during a semester, primarily through eclectic instruction, including a weekly SL/GSSR class. Childcare majors received only the weekly SL/GSSR class, approximately 18 classroom hours during the semester. Both groups read more than 500 pages on average at home. On the same 100-item cloze test, the Childcare majors, despite receiving approximately one-seventh as many classroom hours, made approximately twice the gain of the English majors (Mason, 2018).

Similarly, adding writing, correction, and rewriting to reading did not produce greater measured writing improvement than reading alone, although the additional activities approximately doubled the time required (Mason, 2004). Case histories of adult learners also reported substantial TOEIC gains through self-selected reading, with gains closely related to the amount of time spent reading (Mason & Krashen, 2017).

Such findings do not demonstrate that conscious learning can never be useful. They raise a more practical question: **How much durable language development do learners obtain for each unit of their time and effort?**

The development observed through SL/GSSR is not limited to particular vocabulary items or language that learners have previously encountered. P.O.U.I. aims to develop the underlying language system, which enables learners to understand language in new messages they have never heard or read before. As this system develops, learners become able to understand longer and more complex stories, progress from graded readers toward authentic texts, and improve on standardized measures without studying the particular language that will appear on those tests. Over time, many become capable of choosing and reading English books independently.

Taken together, these findings suggest that learners can develop their language through comprehensible input without being required to study, memorize, practice, receive correction, or produce language. **It is not enough to show that an approach works. We also need to know how efficiently it works.**

7. What Is Language Education For?

Learners' time is precious, so efficiency matters. But efficiency itself is not the final goal. The larger question is what learners become able to do as a result of the time they spend acquiring another language.

The purpose of language education should not be limited to producing everyday conversation, classroom performance, or the language needed for tourism. AI can increasingly translate conversations, provide information, write messages, and help people communicate across languages. It is therefore understandable that some young people are beginning to ask: Why spend years studying a foreign language if AI can do these things for us? If these practical tasks are the main goal, that question is difficult to answer. A more important long-term goal is reading competence.

Through reading, learners can continue receiving language without a teacher. They can encounter ideas, knowledge, literature, history, science, and experiences far beyond those available in the classroom. An independent reader has access to quantities and varieties of language that no individual teacher could provide. Reading is therefore not simply one more language skill. It is a means of continuing both linguistic and intellectual development.

This has become especially important in the age of artificial intelligence. AI can summarize a book, explain an argument, or answer questions about a text. But receiving an AI-generated answer is not the same experience as reading, following the author's thought, encountering something unexpected, questioning it, and gradually developing one's own understanding. AI can give us answers. But we must remain the people who ask, question, judge, and decide.

Language education should therefore help learners become not only users of another language, but independent readers and independent thinkers.

8. Our Responsibility

Language teaching is therefore not merely a question of choosing among equally acceptable classroom activities. Learners give us their time, effort, trust, and often substantial financial resources. We have a responsibility to ask not only whether an instructional activity *works*, but whether it is the best use of those resources.

If an activity requires considerable learner effort and consumes time that could instead be devoted to Optimal Input, saying that it "may be helpful" is not enough. Its contribution should be examined in relation to its costs. If adding an activity does not increase the amount of language development learners achieve for the time and effort they invest, we should question whether it belongs in instruction whose purpose is acquisition.

P.O.U.I. represents my attempt, after more than forty years of classroom teaching and research, to identify conditions that allow language development to occur effectively, efficiently, and with as little unnecessary burden on learners as possible. The input

is **Optimal** because not all comprehensible input is equally valuable. It is **Pure** because it removes activities such as conscious study, memorization, practice, correction, and forced output that, in my research, have not increased the efficiency of language development and may, by taking time and attention away from Optimal Input, interfere with it. It is **Unified** because Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading work together to provide a continuing stream of rich and abundant input, from the beginning stages toward advanced and increasingly independent language development.

The ultimate goal is not to keep learners dependent on instruction. It is to help them reach the point where they can continue developing without us—as readers who can seek knowledge, encounter new ideas, and think and judge for themselves.

The learner acquires. The teacher creates the conditions.

Our responsibility is to provide learners with the richest, most compelling, and most abundant comprehensible input we can, while placing as little unnecessary burden on them as possible.

9. CONCLUSION

The Input Hypothesis proposes that language is acquired through comprehensible input and that comprehensible input is sufficient for language acquisition. The idea that comprehensible input is simply helpful or important is sometimes treated as a weaker interpretation of the hypothesis. However, Krashen did not propose separate weak and strong versions of the hypothesis. **There is no weak version of the Input Hypothesis.** If comprehensible input is sufficient for acquisition, no other factor can also be necessary for acquisition. Other factors may be present and may even contribute, but if they are necessary, then comprehensible input alone is not sufficient. That would contradict the Input Hypothesis. **The claim that comprehensible input is sufficient for language acquisition is the Input Hypothesis itself.**

If the Input Hypothesis is correct, the implications extend beyond the question of how languages are acquired. They extend to the curriculum itself.

Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading need not be supplementary activities added to a conventional textbook-centered English course. They can constitute the core of the language-acquisition program. Story-Listening provides rich, comprehensible spoken input, while GSSR opens the way to increasingly large amounts of comprehensible written input and, ultimately, to independent reading.

This changes the curriculum question. Instead of asking how Story-Listening and GSSR can be fitted into an existing program of textbooks, grammar exercises, vocabulary study, forced output, correction, and testing, we can ask a more fundamental question:

If learners can acquire language through abundant Optimal Input without requiring these additional activities, how much of the conventional language curriculum is actually necessary?

The answer is ultimately an empirical one. The Input Hypothesis makes a prediction that can be tested: learners given sufficient Optimal Input should be able to develop language competence without the instructional activities traditionally assumed to be necessary for acquisition.

If this prediction is supported, the implication is profound. Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading are not simply additions to the conventional curriculum. In one of his final papers, Krashen (2024) identified Story-Listening and Guided Self-Selected Reading as applications of the Input Hypothesis. P.O.U.I. takes the curricular implication of that position one step further.

They are the curriculum.

REFERENCES

Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.

Krashen, S. D. (1985a). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Laredo Publishing Company, Inc.

Krashen, S. D. (1985b). *Inquiries and insights*. Alemany Press.

Krashen, S. (2024). Language acquisition and the power of pleasure reading. *Asian Journal on Perspectives in Education, 5*(1), 19-25. https://doi.org/10.63529/ajpe.v5i1.11211

Krashen, S., & Mason, B. (2020). The optimal input hypothesis: Not all comprehensible input is of equal value. *CATESOL Newsletter*, May, 1–2.

Krashen, S., Mason, B., & Smith, K. (2018). Some new terminology: Comprehension-aiding supplementation and form-focusing supplementation. *Journal of English Language Teaching, 60*(6), 12–13. https://doi.org/10.66121/4k4nxj61

Mason, B. (2004). The effect of adding supplementary writing to an extensive reading program. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, 1*(1), 2–16.

Mason, B. (2006). Free voluntary reading and autonomy in second language acquisition: Improving TOEFL scores from reading alone. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, 2*(1), 2–5.

Mason, B. (2018). A pure comprehension approach: More effective and efficient than eclectic second language teaching? *IBU Journal of Educational Research and Practice, 6*, 69–79.

Mason, B. (2019). Guided SSR before self-selected reading. *Shitennoji University Bulletin, 67*, 445–456.

Mason, B., & Ae, N. (2025). *From pun to plot: Remembering and forgetting in Story-Listening versus List-Learning*. https://www.beniko-mason.net/content/articles/2025-from-pun-to-plot.pdf

Mason, B., & Bucol, J. (2025). Story-Listening and the Pure Optimal Input Approach: Investigating the strong version of the Input Hypothesis. In *The 44th Thailand TESOL International Conference Proceedings 2025* (pp. 33–45). Thailand TESOL.

Mason, B., & Krashen, S. (1997a). Can extensive reading help unmotivated students of EFL improve? *ITL Review of Applied Linguistics, 117–118*, 79–84. https://doi.org/10.1075/itl.117-118.04mas

Mason, B., & Krashen, S. (1997b). Extensive reading in English as a foreign language. *System, 25*(1), 91–102. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X(96)00063-2

Mason, B., & Krashen, S. D. (2017). Self-selected reading and TOEIC performance: Evidence from case histories. *Shitennoji University Bulletin, 63*, 469–475.

Swinton, S. S. (1983). *TOEFL research reports, report 14: A manual for assessing language growth in instructional settings*. Educational Testing Service.