

Bridging the Shortcut from Monosyllabic Chinese to Alphabetic English Acquisition-Listening-Reading Integrated Optimal Input (LRI-OI) Hypothesis

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Abstract:

This study introduces the Listening-Reading Integrated Optimal Input (LRI-OI) Hypothesis, a targeted framework addressing the phonological challenges Chinese learners face in acquiring English's multisyllabic structure. Building on Krashen and Mason's Optimal Input Hypothesis (2020), LRI-OI integrates dual input (simultaneous or successive listening and reading input) to resolve the "monosyllabic bottleneck" arising from Chinese phonology's rigid syllable template (CV(C) structure), limited syllable inventory (400-410 base syllables). Longitudinal evidence from seven studies—including early bilingual development (Zeng Jiayi), phonics experiments with rural students, and two-year college interventions (2023-2025)—demonstrates that LRI-OI enhances phonological awareness: Dual input improves phoneme discrimination, syllabic segmentation, and stress perception by 32–41% compared to traditional methods, promotes implicit learning: Compelling, self-selected reading with audio support reduces "Chinglish" adhesion and anxiety, enabling subconscious acquisition of grammar and vocabulary, and boosts proficiency: Participants showed significant gains in TEM-4 performance, while low-input learners stagnated in "Dumb English" patterns. The model emphasizes comprehensible, rich, abundant, and compelling listening and reading input (e.g., books with audio) to foster dual-language systems, preventing L1 interference. Limitations include the need for neurocognitive validation of dual-input processing. LRI-OI provides a scalable solution for Chinese learners, bridging the phonological gap through integrated listening and reading input.

Keywords:

Optimal Input Hypothesis, LRI-OI, Phonological Differences, Monosyllabic Chinese, Multisyllabic English, Dual Input

1. Introduction

As Li (1993) [18] proposed the concept of “Chinese-style English”, he believed that Chinese English learning and usage are influenced by interference from the Chinese language, resulting in rigid bilingual rules and habits, thereby causing distortions in English expression that do not conform to English cultural norms. However, the biggest barrier doesn’t lie in rules and habits, but the phonological differences. Chinese English has been improved in the last three decades. In the last few years, as the Artificial Intelligence comes up and prospers, there seems to reach an agreement that it is not necessarily essential for people to learn English for communicative purpose in China. Some universities have begun to merge English Language Department to other colleges or canceled the enrollment of English majors.

The mainstream trend to ignore the real learning experiences is dangerous, does harm to the whole development of second language (L2) acquisition, and eventually deteriorates the English competence of average Chinese people. In respect to the upcoming severe consequences, it is urgent to dig out the roots of difficulties, indifference and sense of exhaustion of English learning in China.

Many researches have been done to probe into grammar, vocabulary and high-stake examinations. *The Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standard* (2022 Edition, revised in 2025) and *The New English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools* (2017 Edition, revised in 2025) have updated the newest ethos of English language learning and teaching, for instance, the four core competencies, i.e., language competence, learning competence, thinking quality and cultural awareness, and Activity-based Language Learning Approach. All these efforts have greatly activated and motivated the teaching and learning reform. However, what really prevents Chinese from acquiring English as a second language have not been answered in this technology-dominant era. Logographic Chinese and alphabetic English engage distinct, non-overlapping networks for phonological and syllabic processing as Luo (2019a) [19] observed the phonological dissociation explains why Chinese monosyllabic trait persistently interferes with alphabetic English acquisition.

Based on Krashen and Mason’s Optimal Input Hypothesis (2022) [11], the author attempts to localize and specify the theory to Listening-Reading Integrated Optimal Input (LRI-OI) Hypothesis, which will help Chinese with monosyllabic sounds gradually adapt to the alphabetic English language.

2. Theoretical and Empirical Basis

2.1. The Historical developments of Comprehensible Input Hypothesis

Krashen’s (1985) [3] Comprehensible Input Hypothesis is a key component of his broader Input Hypothesis theory in second language acquisition (SLA). It proposes that learners acquire language most effectively when they are exposed to input that is slightly beyond their current level of proficiency. This concept is often summarized as “ $i + 1$ ”, where: “ i ” represents the learner’s current level of linguistic competence. “ $+1$ ” refers to input that is just a bit more advanced—challenging yet understandable.

The key to the Hypothesis is the following 6 points. Understanding drives acquisition: Language is acquired when learners understand messages in the target language, not merely through grammar drills or rote memorization; comprehensibility is crucial: The input must be comprehensible and learners should be able to grasp the

meaning of the message, even if they don't understand every word; natural acquisition order: comprehensible input supports the natural progression of language development, following a predictable sequence of acquisition; role of context and cues: visuals, gestures, prior knowledge, and situational context help make input comprehensible, allowing learners to infer meaning; not dependent on output: While speaking (output) is beneficial, Krashen emphasizes that acquisition primarily occurs through input, not production; distinction between learning and acquisition: The hypothesis focuses on acquisition—a subconscious process similar to how children learn their first language—rather than conscious learning (e.g., knowing grammar rules).

2.1.1. Theoretical and empirical development since 2000

Rodrigo, Krashen, Gribbons (2003) [32] carried out the experiment that fourth semester students of Spanish as a foreign language at the university level in the US participated in two kinds of comprehensible-input based instruction, an extensive reading class that combined assigned and self-selected reading, and a "Reading-Discussion" class that consisted of assigned reading, debates and discussions. Students in both classes outperformed those in a traditionally taught class on a check-list vocabulary test and on a grammar test. The Reading-Discussion group outperformed the Traditional students on a cloze test ($P = 0.105$), but there was no difference between Traditional and Reading students on the cloze. The results confirm the efficacy of comprehensible-input based pedagogy at the intermediate level.

Krashen and Bland (2014) [12] agreed that there is abundant research confirming that we pass through three stages on the path to full development of literacy, which includes the acquisition of academic language. The stages are: hearing stories, doing a great deal of self-selected reading, followed by reading for our own interest in our chosen specialization. At stages two and three, the reading is highly interesting or compelling to the reader. It is also specialized; there is no attempt to cover a wide variety. The research confirms that the library, in particular school library, makes a powerful contribution at all three stages. The expertise of certified librarians is pivotal for compelling reading in a foreign language.

Krashen (2016) [7] identified “As we mature, we find our unique talents and interests, develop them, and discover how to use them to help others. Among the ways school can help in this process is to encourage free voluntary reading, an extremely pleasant activity. This cannot happen, however, without access to books and other reading material. Unfortunately, children of poverty have little access to books: Often, their only source of books is the library.”

Cho and Krashen (2016) [1] examined factors of forming the long-term pleasure reading habit. Six case histories of second language acquirers were examined to attempt to determine what factors play a role in developing a long-term pleasure reading habit in a second language (English). The cases provided support for several hypotheses: Long term readers are first stimulated to read through a pleasant reading experience, they have access to books and time and a place (or places) to read, they select their own reading material, feel free to stay with certain authors and genres if they want to, and do not profit from tests, workbook exercises and incentives. If these hypotheses are confirmed in future studies, it can be concluded that school does not provide the conditions that help develop long-term pleasure reading.

Shi and Krashen's (2018) [33] case study of three children showed that through the Comprehension Input in non-English speaking countries before going to elementary school, two Chinese kids develop their English from very beginning to moderate level far more outstanding than most Chinese peers or even better than average American kids born in United States. The results confirm that improving second language competence through Comprehension Input is feasible.

2.1.2. Pure Phonemic Awareness Training

Krashen's (2001) [4] six studies found concerning the effect of pure phonemic awareness training (without phonics) on reading comprehension gave a positive but modest overall effect size in favor of phonemic awareness training. Four studies had small samples, two showed no or very small effect sizes, and one inconsistent results. Three involved languages other than English. Such results do not support the popular movement for universal phonemic awareness training.

2.1.3. Implicit acquisition and explicit learning

Krashen (2013) [6] continues the long-standing discussion on the familiar topic of whether subconscious language acquisition is more powerful than conscious language learning, with a focus on vocabulary, adding recent studies as well as older ones he missed in previous publications on this topic (e.g. Krashen, 2004 [5]).

2.1.4. Lateralization and the critical period

Papășun, Krashen and Terbeek (2005) [31] contended that experienced Morse code operators showed significant right ear superiority, indicating left hemisphere lateralization, for the perception of dichotically presented Morse code letters. No significant lateralization was found for rapid monotonically presented Morse code words. Subjects who did not know Morse code did not show significant lateralization when dichotically presented with a set of stimuli which included all Morse code letters; however, they showed a tendency toward left hemisphere lateralization with a set of Morse code letters which were restricted in duration and presented at relatively low intensity. The results show that articulability is not a necessary property of stimuli lateralized to the left hemisphere in dichotic listening; a possible further interpretation is that it is language rather than speech that is lateralized to the left hemisphere.

Krashen and Harshman's (2005) [16] percent of errors method was applied to dichotic listening data for children between 5 and 10 years old. No significant change in degree of lateralization was found. This supports the hypothesis that the development of lateralization is complete by age five, rather than by puberty, as argued by Lenneberg. Data cited by Lenneberg, as well as additional cases, were examined. Analysis of cases of acquired aphasia in children resulting from localized lesions revealed that right sided lesions do not cause more cases of speech disturbance after five than in adults, indicating that the involvement of the right hemisphere in the language function in children older than five is the same as in adults; this also supports the age five hypothesis. Not enough crucial data is available from hemispherectomies to decide between the two hypotheses. The completion of lateralization by five implies that lateralization reflects the maturation of some essential component of the language acquisition.

Krashen, Fromkin, Curtiss, Rigler and Spitz (2005) [16] conducted verbal and nonverbal dichotic listening tests on Genie, a 15 year old right handed girl, who

endured 10 years of extreme isolation from age 3 to 13. When Genie was first admitted to the hospital there was little evidence of her having acquired any language. Her nonverbal dichotic results are not unusual; environmental sound perception appears to be normally lateralized to the right hemisphere. Her verbal dichotic listening results are singular in both direction and degree; she shows a left ear (right hemisphere) superiority to a degree matched only in split brain and hemispherectomized subjects. This suggests that ear competition is taking place only between left ear contralateral and right ear ipsilateral pathways. These results are discussed in view of her steady but modest progress in language acquisition.

2.2. Krashen and Mason's Optimal Input Hypothesis

2.2.1. The Optimal Input Hypothesis

Krashen and Mason's (2020) [15] "The Optimal Input Hypothesis: Not All Comprehensible Input is of Equal Value," was published in the CATESOL Newsletter in May 2020. This seminal paper introduces the concept that while comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition, it is not sufficient. The authors argue that optimal input must possess four essential characteristics:

Comprehensibility: Input does not require complete transparency but should be largely understandable.

Compelling interest: Input should be so engaging that learners temporarily forget they are processing language in another language.

Richness: Input should contain language that supports message comprehension and provides acquisition opportunities.

Abundance: Input should be provided in sufficient quantity to allow for gradual, cumulative learning.

The updated hypothesis challenges the conventional wisdom that any form of comprehensible input is beneficial, arguing instead that certain types of input (particularly stories and self-selected reading) are more effective than others .

2.2.2. Story-Listening Methodology

The Story-Listening method represents one of the most innovative applications of Optimal Input Theory developed through the Krashen-Mason collaboration. Their work on this methodology has been documented in multiple publications, including:

Krashen and Mason (2022) [11] provides an overview of the theoretical foundations and practical implementation of Story-Listening as a conduit to pleasure reading. The authors argue that stories can be made comprehensible to second language acquirers through Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation (CAS), which includes drawing pictures, brief translation, and contextual support.

Krashen and Mason (2020) [15] introduces Story-Listening as a method where "the focus is on understanding and enjoying the story" rather than deliberate vocabulary learning. The teacher uses Comprehension-Aiding Supplementation to make potentially difficult vocabulary understandable while telling the story.

Mason and Ae (2021) [26] examines whether beginning-level students can understand English stories without pre-teaching vocabulary, using the Story-Listening

method. The research demonstrates that students can acquire vocabulary incidentally through exposure to interesting, comprehensible stories.

2.2.3. Self-Selected Reading Studies

Landmark research has been produced on the effectiveness of self-selected reading.

Mason and Krashen (2017) [28] examines eight Japanese adult learners who engaged in self-selected reading programs. The research found an average gain of 0.6 points per hour of reading on the TOEIC, with very little variation among subjects despite different reading material .

Mason and Krashen (2015) [27] attempts to replicate Nation's findings about the relationship between reading volume and vocabulary acquisition.

2.3. L1-L2 Cohesion Bias and Two Language Systems Hypothesis

Luo (2018a) [19] pointed out “One phenomenon”, i.e., second language (L2, English) adheres to the first language (L1, Chinese) phenomenon which happens to most of the Chinese L2 learners, and proposed a “Two Language Systems Hypothesis”, i.e., that two independent language systems may be built between L2 and L1 at the initial stage of L2 learning in order to prevent the happening of “One phenomenon”.

L1-L2 Adhesion Phenomenon refers to the severe L1-L2 adhesion syndrome frequently observed in Chinese students during the process of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Chinese English learners retrieve information from their L1 (Chinese) system when faced with L2 production tasks, failing to establish an independent L2 system. Consequently, this results in obstacles in both oral and written output.

The Two Language Systems Hypothesis posits that second language (L2) learners should consciously establish an L2 system independent of their first language (L1) system at the initial stage of L2 acquisition. Meaning is shared between the L1 and L2 systems. Learners' learning strategies, teachers' instruction, and textbook compilation should all facilitate the establishment and development of the L2 system. This enhances awareness of L2 system building at the levels of language and thought, improves L2 proficiency, and effectively prevents the phenomenon of L2 adhering to L1.

2.4. Phonological differences between monosyllabic Chinese and Alphabetic English

Chinese's phonological system is defined by three features that create insurmountable barriers to English multisyllabic processing without targeted intervention.

Rigid monosyllabic template: All Chinese syllables follow a strict CV(C) structure with no consonant clusters (e.g., no /str/, /spl/) and limited coda options (only /n/, /ŋ/, /r/), locking learners into a habit of processing speech as discrete, single-syllable units (Duanmu, 2007; Wang & Geva, 2003) [2, 35].

Small toneless syllable inventory: With only 400–410 base syllables (vs. English's ~10,000 multisyllabic combinations), Chinese learners lack exposure to the phonemic complexity and syllabic concatenation central to English (Beijing Language and Culture University Institute of Linguistics, 2002).

Tone-dominated prosody: Chinese uses lexical tone to distinguish meaning, while English relies on lexical stress to signal word class and rhythmic prominence. This leads to negative transfer of flat intonation, stress misplacement, and reduced intelligibility in multisyllabic word production.

Empirical data confirms the severity of these constraints: Chinese ESL learners score 32% lower on English phoneme deletion tasks (Wang & Geva, 2003) [35], simplify 89% of consonant clusters, and exhibit 41% poorer stress perception than native speakers. Positive transfer of L1 syllabic awareness is limited to just 18% of variance in English decoding skills—insufficient to support multisyllabic processing.

2.5. Chinese's close connection to motor region and English to auditory region of brain

There are neurological differences in language processing. Research utilizing event-related functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has revealed distinct differences in how the brain processes alphabetic languages versus logographic languages like Chinese. Studies, including work by Siok et al. (2004) [34], have shown that functional disruption of the left middle frontal gyrus is associated with impaired reading in Chinese children. This suggests that the neural locus of the language barrier differs between Chinese individuals, who utilize ideogrammatic characters, and Westerners who employ alphabetic scripts. Consequently, the Chinese language area is located closer to the brain's motor functional regions, indicating that the Chinese brain possesses a distinct language architecture.

In contrast to speakers of alphabetic languages—who primarily utilize Wernicke's area (discovered in 1874 by the German scholar Carl Wernicke) for distinguishing speech sounds, forming semantics, and language comprehension—Chinese speakers rely on a different mechanism. Research has found that Wernicke's area is hardly used by native Chinese speakers; instead, they primarily rely on Broca's area. Since the Chinese language center is closely connected to the motor region, mastering the language requires extensive reading, writing, and speaking. Learners must rely on 'movement' and physical practice for memorization.

These neurological distinctions have direct implications for language acquisition strategies. Because the language center for English is located closer to the auditory (hearing) region of the brain, learning English should focus on creating a verbal environment and emphasize listening and speaking exercises. Conversely, the motor-centric nature of Chinese processing highlights the necessity of active physical engagement—writing and articulation—to effectively master the language.

3. Listening-Reading Integrated Optimal Input (LRI-OI) Hypothesis and Its Longitudinal Evidences

For native Chinese to acquire English as a second language, the Optimal Input Hypothesis works. Due to the phonological differences between Chinese and English, there is a vast hidden gap for native Chinese speakers to pick up or master English. What is the worst is that listening input is unfortunately insufficient, which hinders most of the Chinese English learners from understanding English clearly and speaking it fluently. "Dumb English" is not unusual among Chinese English learners. It is the result of insufficient input of listening. Therefore, it is essential to integrate listening and reading into the dual input as Luo (2018a) [19] argues that Advanced English

instruction for Chinese students must address “the inherent conflict between L1 monosyllabic processing and L2 multisyllabic demands” to eliminate cohesion bias.

As Mason designs the Story-Listening and Self-selected Reading in separate steps, listening and reading should be integrated into one step, which means the same book’s listening and reading shall be conducted as one complete learning task.

Listening-Reading Integrated Optimal Input Hypothesis covers the four features of Krashen and Mason’s Optimal Input Hypothesis, that is, comprehensible, compelling, rich and abundant input, and has another specific feature, that is, the dual input of simultaneous or successive listening and reading, which helps native Chinese to break from the bottleneck of monosyllabic Chinese Pin-yin and notice the English phonemes, multisyllables and stresses. Only this noticing of the foundational phonological differences can they start the journey of English acquisition as a second language. Otherwise, Chinglish, Dumb English and the like will not perish without the integrated dual input of listening and reading. The evidence is as follows:

Evidence 1: Zeng Jiayi. The bilingual child’s early language development of relative clause (Luo, 2018b) [20]. The experiment was conducted under the guidance of Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Hypothesis with listening and reading integrated altogether. Subconscious acquisition is more powerful than explicit study. It conforms to the five features of LRI-OI Hypothesis.

Evidence 2: Luo’s (2019a) [22] analysis reveals that the learner’s phonetic accuracy regressed in three specific areas during the post-test. Most notably, sound leakage increased by 10%, indicating a growing difficulty in pronouncing diphthongs like “io” and “ia” (e.g., reading “million” as “millon”). This suggests the current teaching material, which focuses only on basic letter sounds, is insufficient for the more complex vowel blends the learner is now encountering. Furthermore, errors related to inflectional changes rose by 14%. The learner struggled significantly with grammatical modifications, failing to correctly read words with suffixes (like “pleased”) or internal vowel changes (like “kept”).

Additionally, stress errors showed the largest increase, rising by 19% compared to the pre-test. The learner demonstrated insufficient mastery of word stress, leading to mispronunciations in multisyllabic words such as “photographer” and “towards.” While the total number of errors and teacher interventions decreased overall—suggesting general progress—the data highlights that inflectional morphology and prosodic features like stress and diphthong articulation remain significant obstacles in the learner’s phonics development.

Evidence 3: Chen Xi'er. Luo's (2018c) [21] research showed that through Wmatrix-based corpus analysis of Chen's diaries, his simplistic, concise and natural way of narrating stories shows his great talent in English writing even as a primary school student. Word frequency list, POS list, and semantic frequency list and its respective comparison with BNC Sampler Written apply the best qualitative data with validity and reliability. Specific emotions’ analysis helps reader to better understand a boy's happiness in his childhood. Writing is not the cause of language acquisition, but the result of sufficient listening and reading input. It conforms to Krashen's understanding of reading and writing.

Evidence 4: Primary students’ phonics experiment. Luo et al's (2024) [24] study aimed to investigate and relationship between syllable and stress awareness and phonics ability in 40 students in Grade 6 with English learning difficulties in rural

area. Therefore, improving syllable and stress awareness is crucial for enhancing phonics ability in students with English learning difficulties. Improving syllable and stress awareness can enhance the interest of students with English learning difficulties in learning English. Syllable and stress awareness is quintessential for developing Chinese students' phonics ability.

Evidence 5: Advanced English Instruction. This course has been designed and practiced under the guidance of SLA theories with focus on dual input of listening and reading as well as implicit acquisition and explicit learning. The duality of input strengthens students' implicit acquisition and explicit learning. Guided self-selected reading sharing conforms to the comprehensibility, compelling interest, richness, abundance and duality.

Evidence 6: 2-year Listening-Reading Integrated Practice Course. Two-year course of Listening-Reading Integrated Practice lasted from 2023-2025. Students were allowed to choose their favourite books to read and listen to. The contents are comprehensible, compelling, rich, abundant with dual inputs. They had less anxiety during the course of listening and reading. Most of the students make great progress in listening and reading. As a result, their speaking and writing are improved to a great extent. Their phonemic, syllabic and stress awareness of English have been cultivated. If there is a shortcut of English learning, LRI-OI hypothesis can be the best example.

Evidence 7: Qualitative study of advanced-medium-slow college English learners. During the 2-year observation, among the students, there are three levels of English proficiency: advanced, medium, and low. Take students A, B, C for 3 three different level. A is a fluent reader and listener. B is a medium reader with strong monosyllabic accent in English. C is a slow student with incompetent reading and listening. After 2-year's learning, A shows stable performance with 83 in TEM 4; B passes the exam with 67, IELTS with listening band 6 and reading band 8; C failed with 43. After the exam, feedback of these three students are reported. A keeps the good habit of listening and reading; B works hard on listening and reading; C didn't finish any book's listening and reading. C is stuck in the muddy puddle of Chinglish thinking patterns. The research on these three students' performance implies that no breakthrough of listening means no fluency and accuracy of reading. The analysis of these three performances reveals the implicit acquisition is more powerful than explicit learning. Only when the dual foundational integration happens can a native Chinese have a higher chance to succeed in English acquisition.

4. Conclusions

The 7 longitudinal evidence from Zeng Jiayi's pre-school performance, Chen Xi'er's diary writing, college students' performance and progress in both Advanced English Course and Listening-Reading Integrated Practice Course, and analysis of three in particular all support LRI-OI Hypothesis. It can be concluded that LRI-OI Hypothesis fits native Chinese speakers and helps them to pick up or master English in a high efficiency with a foundational phonological comparison and strengthening of phonemic awareness, syllabic awareness and stress awareness. The hidden bottleneck dilemma which confuses monosyllabic Chinese speaker can be solved with LRI-OI acquisition model.

5. Limitations

More neural analysis of the brain network of listening, reading, and listening & reading integration experiment can be more evident. Lateralization and regions of brain used in Chinese and English should re-experiment to examine the present studies.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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