

# Comprehensible input for the Italian language: how it works



## From language learning theories to the best Italian course

Ciao! I'm Stefano, the Italian polyglot. I'll tell you what I know about comprehensible input.

I'm not a scholar in the field of **linguistics**. I'm just a guy who learns languages and I'm used to practical advice.

However, that doesn't mean that theory is useless. In fact, it's important to know how language learning works so that you set realistic expectations and choose the **best learning resources**.

In this post, I deal with an important concept of language learning that is unknown to the casual learner and overlooked by the most popular courses, textbooks, and apps: comprehensible input.

I believe that an introduction to the topic is useful because a lack of understanding of language acquisition is often the cause of poor results and dissatisfaction with more or less well-designed language-learning products.

To keep things practical and not too academic, I'll develop the topic as follows:

1. To show how important it is to choose a study method based on this principle, I'll show you the **difficulties** that we all experience while learning a foreign language in a way that you can relate
2. As a first conclusion, for those who are struggling with the Italian language and want a practical solution, I recommend a specific **course** that provides plenty of comprehensible input: "Ripeti con me!"
3. For those who want to know more, I'll discuss in depth Stephen Krashen's theory of second language acquisition including comprehensible input

## Ever felt frustrated listening to fast Italian?



## Why is it so hard to catch spoken Italian?

When people **speak to you in fast Italian** (or any other language), it can be hard to understand... I mean really hard!

You know what it's like: you've been learning Italian for a while, and you thought you'd be able to understand people by now.

**When** conversations are slowed down, you can often get the gist of what they're saying...but you can't slow things down in real life!

However, still find yourself panicking whenever you're in a conversation with someone at a normal speed.

You lose confidence when you're stuck trying to translate what you heard in your head, and the speaker is already 10 sentences further on.

After all, you've outgrown your beginner's textbooks, but as you've already discovered, real people don't speak anything like your textbook, so you've got a problem.

Is it you? **Or** your study method?

## Should you watch and read native material?

When you ask people for advice, especially native speakers of the language, they tell you to watch movies or TV, listen to the radio, download **podcasts**...

On the other hand, however much you might want to be able to watch movies and listen to the radio in my languages, that's not how you master a language.

Whenever you try to watch this "native-level" material, you'd be so overwhelmed by the speed of the conversations, new words, unfamiliar accents, slang expressions and difficult topics that you'd feel frustrated.

What's more, even if you could find something interesting to listen to, it never has any of the supporting material you would need to actually make good use of it, such as a transcript so you could read the words that were being spoken.

The solution involves an important concept in language learning theory called "comprehensible input".

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## Comprehensible input: neither too hard, nor too easy

Comprehensible Input is a term invented by Dr [Stephen Krashen](#), who said that you can only learn new language when the material you're using – your input – is comprehensible (understandable).

This means that the level of your material needs to be pitched just right, so it's not too hard, and you can understand just enough that you can follow along with the gist of the conversation even if there are some unknown words.

Think of comprehensible input as “your current level +1”.

Now compare this level to the level of the study material you're trying to understand.

Your beginner's [textbook](#) is too easy for you: “-1” so there's nothing new for you to learn.

But the movies, TV and podcasts, along with all the panicky conversations I was trying to have with native speakers, are far too hard for you to understand: “+100!”

## Bridging the gap from beginner to advanced

If you want to improve your [listening skills](#), I would need to find material that somehow bridged the gap between “too easy” and “too hard”.

Ideally, that material should be:

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- Interesting and compelling to keep me motivated to listen and understand
- Just the right length, so as not to feel overwhelmed
- Based on real conversations, including **1000 most common Italian words**, to learn how people actually talk
- Inclusive of full transcripts of all the audio, to the spoken words to the written words
- Inclusive of English translations, to avoid spending all day with your head in the dictionary
- At your level +1

By the way, if you rely on audio, you can also **learn Italian in the car**.



## Conclusion 1: the perfect material exists (for the Italian language)

As a language learner, I've always struggled to find this material anywhere, but **at least** I'm already used to learning languages so I can get by with second-best solutions.

However, as an Italian language teacher, I haven't found yet anything like that, so I eventually started making my own: "**Ripeti con me!**"

Now, the course is 160-lesson long and I'm still adding new lessons.

The contents are arranged so that you gradually improve by **spaced repetition**.

# Comprehensible input for the Italian language: how it works

This unique learning resource will help you understand fast, spoken language, so you can transform your listening skills, take a fuller part in conversations yourself, and reach your true language learning potential.

It will get you think in Italian.

If you're [learning Italian](#), you've just found the perfect course.

Read this [review](#), try a free sample and download the [full course](#) today.

If you're learning other languages, you could still take this course as a model and look for something similar.

## Benefits of the input-based approach

You can listen to or read the right input anywhere. You can do it by listening [in your car](#), washing the dishes as I do or exercising. You just have it with you, you're waiting somewhere and you do it. So it's very easy. You don't have to go to a classroom, half an hour to get there, sit in the class, half an hour to come back.

If you're listening or reading, you're 100% with the language. In a classroom, [half](#) of the time you're having to listen to other students who may not use the language as well as you do and so, to my mind, it's much less effective than time you spend with the language.

You don't [fear making mistakes](#). A lot of people are afraid to make mistakes. If you're forced to speak, you'll make mistakes, but that's part of the learning process and you're alone, anyway. The things that are unclear and fuzzy at an early stage will eventually start to become clearer. So, you're not really making mistakes, but you're in that stage of your learning where the brain is gradually becoming more and more familiar with the language.

By the way, to [enhance your brain power](#), I can recommend the [best nootropics for studying languages](#).

Finally, learning via an input-based approach is cheaper than [going to class](#).

However, input-based learning has a drawback and that is for it to be effective you have to be motivated. You have to be disciplined. You have to be a self-starter. You have to be curious about things. You have to go out and find some content of interest. You have to have the confidence that you can succeed. This is often the problem with inexperienced language learners who have never really become fluent in another language.

Now that the mood is set, we'll look into comprehensive input in greater detail.

[This](#) knowledge is also useful to choose the right study material and, more broadly, to boot the efficiency of your study time overall.



## What is comprehensible input?

The term 'comprehensible input' refers to language that is intelligible but just a little more advanced than the student's current ability to understand it. This means that the overall message of the language is clear even though some words and grammatical structures might be unfamiliar.

Comprehensible input is language input that can be understood by listeners despite them not understanding all the words and structures in it. It is described as one level above that of the learners if it can only just be understood.

This concept is from one of five hypotheses in linguist Stephen Krashen's theory of second language acquisition developed in the 1980s.

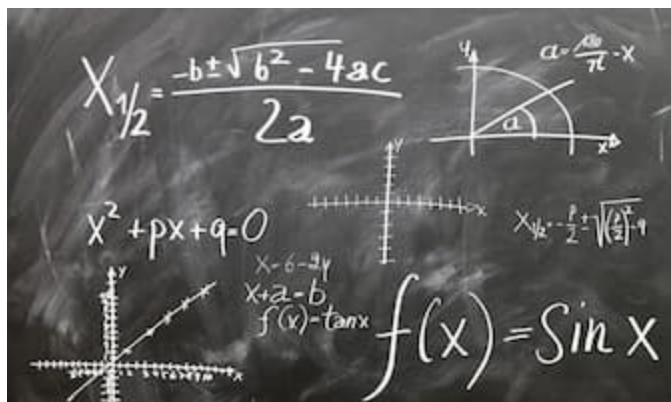
According to Krashen's theory of language acquisition, giving learners this kind of input helps them acquire language naturally, rather than learn it consciously.

According to Krashen, **language learning** is the process whereby a student actively tries to gain understanding. This is different from **language acquisition**, which is the process whereby a student naturally (passively) gains understanding. From his research, Krashen explains that comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition.

For example, the teacher selects a reading text for upper-intermediate level learners that is from a lower advanced level coursebook. Based on what the teacher knows about the learners, the teacher believes that this will give them 'comprehensible input' to help them acquire more language.

In the classroom, trying to understand language slightly above their level encourages learners to use natural learning strategies such as guessing words from context and inferring meaning.

As the example suggests, a teacher needs to know the level of the learners very well in order to select comprehensible input, and in a large class of mixed ability, different learners will need different texts.



## The formula for comprehensible Input

Krashen summarizes his comprehensible input hypothesis in the simple and elegant expression  $i+1$ . Here, the letter  $i$  stands for input, which is the student's current language ability level. The '+1' is exposure to slightly more advanced language that leads to acquisition. When we combine both parts of the statement into  $i+1$ , we give students a task that is challenging yet achievable.

$$\text{Comprehensible Input} = \text{Input} + 1. (i+1)$$

The  $i+1$  expression is our key to understanding Krashen's hypothesis. If we are only providing the  $i$  level of language exposure to our students, we are not challenging them enough to acquire new language. On the other hand, if we provide  $i+2$ , we are giving our students a challenge that is too difficult to achieve. This often leads to frustration, decreased motivation and the desire to simply give up.

## How to determine the right level of instruction?

The key to knowing the appropriate value of  $i$  to incorporate into instruction is to get to know our students and their backgrounds. This requires time, patience and diagnostic tools such as entrance exams, writing samples and even simple conversations with our students. We must first identify the current language ability levels of students, as well as their language backgrounds, in order to find the perfect  $i+1$  support structures.

For example, we may have a student who struggles with correct capitalization usage in Italian because her first language—Mandarin—does not commonly use capitalization. Similarly, we might have a student who struggles with proper syntax in Italian because his first language of English uses different syntax rules.

With this information in hand, we can anticipate and identify common challenges stemming from the learner's native language. We may provide comprehensible input for each individual learner or for an entire class of students depending on the needs of the students and the teacher's learning objectives.





## Examples of comprehensible input strategies and activities

### Comprehensible input strategies

Different levels of proficiency required different comprehensible input strategies:

- **Direct Instruction.** Teachers can use this strategy with beginners, who do not understand the language. It consists of instructing the students on what they should do. According to such instructional input, students watch the teacher do something and then they can model it.
- **Joint Construction.** This strategy can be used with the students who already have some basic language knowledge. Such students can already follow the instructions themselves but still need some guidance from the teacher.
- **Coached Construction.** Teachers can use this strategy with intermediate students. Now, the teacher observes the students applying strategies on their own and offers suggestions only as needed.
- **Monitoring.** This comprehensible input strategy is suitable for advanced students. At this stage, they require a minimum guidance from the teacher and are capable of following the instructions without constant supervision.

### Comprehensible input activities

How can you practice the comprehensible input in the classroom? Here are some comprehensible input activities:

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- Use different sources of input. Make sure that your students master the language at all levels – speaking, listening, reading and writing. Give your students enough room to experiment with the language.
- Tell stories. Storytelling is one of the most successful comprehensible input activities because an exciting story can arouse interest in improving language skills in order to understand the plot better. However, make sure that your stories include at least 80 percent words and expressions that your students can understand. The Italian short stories (news in Italian work, too) should also contain realistic examples that may help the students exercise their language skills in real life. Another good idea is to write a story frame and let the students fill in the details.
- Visualize. One of the comprehensible input examples is to use drawings, images, doodles or objects in order to illustrate the complex or abstract concepts that you are explaining.
- Sing songs. **Songs** and rhymes help the students understand and memorize the words that sound similarly or even equally, but have different meanings, for example, “write – right”.
- Play games. There is a wide range of conversational games, such as “I’m going on a trip,” “Bingo” or “Important Numbers”, which can also be used as comprehensible input techniques.
- Specialized reading. Read with students the texts that focus only on one narrow topic, and study new vocabulary that is related to this topic. The students can also choose their own topics of interest.
- Watch news or movies. Dedicate the entire lesson to watching news and movies, and then discussing what you watched in a group. Such an approach will improve both the listening comprehension and speaking skills as part of comprehensible input.

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- **Correction of mistakes.** Give the students texts that contain grammar or spelling mistakes and encourage them to find and correct those mistakes.
- **Listen and draw.** Describe a picture to the students, and then have them draw the picture based on your instructions. Students can also work in pairs and describe the pictures to each other.
- **Adapt your speech.** Use less complex vocabulary whenever possible and limit the use of idioms.

Italian idioms, Italian sayings, Italian proverbs, Italian quotes, or even **Italian swear words** make excellent comprehensible input because of the emotional reaction they generate.

## Stephen Krashen's enlightening speech

Stephen Krashen (University of Southern California) is an expert in the field of linguistics, specializing in theories of language acquisition and development. Much of his recent research has involved the study of non-English and bilingual language acquisition. Since 1980, he has published well over 100 books and articles and has been invited to deliver over 300 lectures at universities throughout the United States and Canada.

Krashen's main work, "**Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition**" is available online for free in PDF format.

See here an enlightening video by Krashen about comprehensible input. It's almost brutally straightforward!

Below you find the most important part of the speech. For a full transcript, click [here](#).

## An outrageous statement

I'd like to begin my presentation this afternoon by talking about what I **think** is the most important issue in language education, the most important question. And that is how do we acquire language?

And I'd like to begin this discussion, this presentation with an outrageous statement:

In my opinion, we all acquire language the same way.

The reason this is an outrageous thing to say is that these days in education, we're living in an age of individual variation. We're very concerned about how our students are different, not how our students are the same.

# Comprehensible input for the Italian language: how it works

All those who've been around in the field for a while remember all about how 15-20 years ago, people were very concerned about something called field dependent learners and field independent learners. Give people certain tests, and one group gets this treatment and one gets the other.

Then about 15 years ago it was left side of the brain, right side of the brain. Some people are left hemisphere thinkers some people are right hemisphere.

Then about ten years ago cognitive style: the cognitive style of home culture differs from the cognitive style of the school culture, we have a clash etc.

Well, each of these examples I gave you is probably correct. There is individual variation and there's quite a bit of it. Nevertheless, there are some things we all do the same.

...

And now I'm gonna share with you the most important thing I have learned about language, probably the best kept secret in the profession:

We acquire language in one way and only one way. When we understand messages.

We call this comprehensible input. We acquire language when we understand what people tell us, not how they say it but what they say. Or when we understand what we read. Comprehensible input in my opinion has been the last resort of the language teaching profession. We've tried everything else: We've tried grammar teaching, drills and exercises, computers etc.

But the only thing that seems to count is getting messages you understand, comprehensible input. Now one of the reasons lesson number two was better than lesson number one is we had Mr. Spock to help us out. So anything that helps make input comprehensible (pictures, knowledge of the world, realia etc.) helps language acquisition.

If comprehensible input is true, what we call the input hypothesis is true, other things follow from it and a very important corollary to the input hypothesis is this – and this may come as a bit of a surprise to some of you, certainly came as a surprise to me: Talking is not practicing.

Talking is not practicing – what does this mean? It means if you want to improve your Spanish, you will not help you to speak Spanish out loud in the car as you drive to work in the morning. You will not help you to go to the bathroom, close the door and speak Spanish to the mirror. I used to think those things help, now I think they don't.

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On the other hand, if we were a German class and we could hang together for a couple of weeks, say an hour a day of German, and I could keep the input light and lively as in the second example, you'd start to acquire German. It would come on its own and eventually you'd start to talk. Your speaking ability would emerge gradually. Now, we have a lot of evidence that this is true and the evidence is in the professional literature, in books and journal papers etc. and if **you're an insomniac you're welcome** to look at all that.

...

Let me now try to summarize everything I've said in the last 10-15 minutes or so and I'll summarize it in one sentence and you will wonder why it took me that long.

We acquire **language in one way** and only one way: when we get comprehensible input in a low anxiety environment.



## The 5 hypotheses of Krashen's theory of second language acquisition

Now, I'll try to explain Krashen's widely known and well-accepted theory of second language acquisition, which has had a large impact in all areas of second language research and teaching.

Krashen's theory of second language acquisition consists of five main hypotheses:

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1. The acquisition–learning hypothesis claims that there is a strict separation between acquisition and learning; Krashen saw acquisition as a purely subconscious process and learning as a conscious process, and claimed that improvement in language ability was only dependent upon acquisition and never on learning.
2. The monitor hypothesis states that consciously learned language can only be used to monitor language output; it can never be the source of spontaneous speech.
3. The input hypothesis. This states that learners progress in their knowledge of the language when they comprehend language input that is slightly more advanced than their current level. Krashen called this level of input “i+1”, where “i” is the learner’s interlanguage and “+1” is the next stage of language acquisition.
4. The affective filter hypothesis. This states that learners’ ability to acquire language is constrained if they are experiencing negative emotions such as fear or embarrassment. At such times the affective filter is said to be “up”.
5. The natural order hypothesis states that language is acquired in a particular order, and that this order does not change between learners, and is not affected by explicit instruction.

## Acquisition vs learning hypothesis

The Acquisition-Learning distinction is the most fundamental of the five hypotheses in Krashen’s theory and the most widely known among linguists and language teachers. According to Krashen there are two independent systems of foreign language performance: ‘the acquired system’ and ‘the learned system’. The ‘acquired system’ or ‘acquisition’ is the product of a subconscious process very similar to the process children undergo when they acquire their first language. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language – natural communication – in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances, but in the communicative act.

The “learned system” or “learning” is the product of formal instruction and it comprises a conscious process which results in conscious knowledge ‘about’ the language, for example knowledge of grammar rules. A deductive approach in a teacher-centered setting produces “learning”, while an inductive approach in a student-centered setting leads to “acquisition”.

According to Krashen ‘learning’ is less important than ‘acquisition’.

## Monitor hypothesis

The Monitor hypothesis explains the relationship between acquisition and learning and defines the influence of the latter on the former. The monitoring function is the practical result of the learned grammar. According to Krashen, the acquisition system is the utterance initiator, while the learning system performs the role of the ‘monitor’ or the ‘editor’. The ‘monitor’ acts in a planning, editing and correcting function when three specific conditions are met:

- The second language learner has sufficient time at their disposal
- They focus on form or think about accuracy
- They know the rule

It appears that the role of conscious learning is somewhat limited in second language performance.

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According to Krashen, the role of the monitor is minor, being used only to correct deviations from “normal” speech and to give speech a more ‘polished’ appearance.

Krashen also suggests that there is individual variation among language learners with regard to ‘monitor’ use. He distinguishes those learners that use the ‘monitor’ all the time (over-users); those learners who have not learned or who prefer not to use their conscious knowledge (under-users); and those learners that use the ‘monitor’ appropriately (optimal users). An evaluation of the person’s psychological profile can help to determine what group they belong to. Usually, extroverts are under-users, while introverts and perfectionists are over-users. Lack of self-confidence is frequently related to the over-use of the “monitor”.



## Input hypothesis

The **Input hypothesis** is Krashen’s attempt to explain how the learner acquires a second language – how second language acquisition takes place.

The Input hypothesis is only concerned with ‘acquisition’, not ‘learning’. According to this hypothesis, the learner improves and progresses along with the ‘natural order’ when he/she receives second language ‘input’ that is one step beyond his/her current stage of linguistic competence.

For example, if a learner is at a stage ‘i’, then acquisition takes place when he/she is exposed to ‘Comprehensible Input’ that belongs to level ‘i + 1’.

Since not all of the learners can be at the same level of linguistic competence at the same time, Krashen suggests that natural communicative input is the key to designing a syllabus, ensuring in this way that each learner will receive some ‘i + 1’ input that is appropriate for his/her current stage of linguistic competence.

## Affective filter hypothesis

The Affective Filter hypothesis embodies Krashen’s view that a number of ‘affective variables’ play a facilitative, but non-causal, role in second language acquisition. These variables include motivation, self-confidence, anxiety and personality traits.

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Krashen claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, a low level of anxiety and extroversion are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem, anxiety, introversion, and inhibition can raise the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition.

In other words, when the filter is 'up' it impedes language acquisition. On the other hand, positive affect is necessary, but not sufficient on its own, for acquisition to take place.

## Natural order hypothesis

Finally, the less important Natural Order hypothesis is based on research findings which suggested that the acquisition of grammatical structures follows a 'natural order' which is predictable. For a given language, some grammatical structures tend to be acquired early while others late.

This order **seemed to** be independent of the learners' age, L1 background, conditions of exposure, and although the agreement between individual acquirers was not always 100% in the studies, there were statistically significant similarities that reinforced the existence of a Natural Order of language acquisition.

Krashen, however, points out that the implication of the natural order hypothesis is not that a language program syllabus should be based on the order found in the studies. In fact, he rejects grammatical sequencing when the goal is language acquisition.



## Is it useful to study grammar? Krashen's view

According to Krashen, the study of the structure of the language can have general educational advantages and values that high schools and colleges may want to include in their language programs. **Any** benefit, however, will greatly depend on the learner being already familiar with the language.



# Comprehensible input for the Italian language: how it works

It should also be clear that analyzing the language, formulating rules, setting irregularities apart, and teaching complex facts about the target language is not language teaching, but rather is “language appreciation” or linguistics, which does not lead to communicative proficiency.

The only instance in which the teaching of grammar can result in language acquisition (and proficiency) is when the students are interested in the subject and the target language is used as a medium of instruction.

Very often, when this occurs, both teachers and students are convinced that the study of formal grammar is essential for second language acquisition, and the teacher is skillful enough to present explanations in the target language so that the students understand.

In other words, the teacher talk meets the requirements for comprehensible input and perhaps, with the students’ participation, the classroom becomes an environment suitable for acquisition. Also, the filter is low in regard to the language of explanation, as the students’ conscious efforts are usually on the subject matter, on what is being talked about, and not the medium.

This is a subtle point. In effect, both teachers and students are deceiving themselves. They believe that it is the subject matter itself, the study of grammar, that is responsible for the students’ progress, but in reality, their progress is coming from the medium and not the message. Any subject matter that held their interest would do just as well.

## Conclusion 2: put the 5 hypotheses into practice

The hypotheses put primary importance on the comprehensible input (CI) that language learners are exposed to. Understanding the spoken and written language input is seen as the only mechanism that results in the increase of underlying linguistic competence, and language output is not seen as having any effect on learners’ ability.

Furthermore, Krashen claimed that linguistic competence is only advanced when language is subconsciously acquired and that conscious learning cannot be used as a source of spontaneous language production.

Finally, learning is seen to be heavily dependent on the mood of the learner, with learning being impaired if the learner is under stress or does not want to learn the language.

Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules and does not require a tedious drill.

Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language – **natural communication** – in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding.

Comprehensible input is the crucial and necessary ingredient for the acquisition of language.

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The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear.

These methods do not force early production in the second language but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production.

In the real world, conversations with sympathetic native speakers who are willing to help the acquirer understand are very helpful.

Now that you know how all this works, be aware of these facts when studying a language!

And, if you're learning Italian, check out "[Ripeti con me!](#)"

Are you serious about learning Italian? Check out our premium resources to become fluent fast!