

obs.	obsolete
ODu	Old Dutch
OE	Old English
OFr	Old French
OHGer	Old High German
OLGer	Old Low German
ON	Old Norse
Sc	Scottish
Scand	Scandinavian
Sw	Swedish
synon.	synonymous
*	unrecorded form

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EGON KARLSSON

An Outline of the Language Acquisition Debate

Debatten om hur språkinläring bäst bör befrämjas är livlig och omfattande. Amerikanen Stephen Krashen är kanske den mest kände, och omstridde, internationelle forskaren inom området (se Egon Karlssons intervju med honom i *Moderna Språk* 1 1995). Men han är långt ifrån ensam, vilket framgår av denna forskningsresumé. Författaren är språklärare från Växjö.

A. ACQUISITIONAL HYPOTHESES

1. The Input-Only Hypothesis

Krashen claims that language acquisition comes from input, not output – from comprehension, not production. The ability to speak is a result, not a cause, of language acquisition. No acquirer of language has been shown to develop high levels of competence without comprehensible input. In *The Power of Reading* from 1993 he even contends that reading is potent enough to do nearly the entire job alone (cf Krashen 1996, Elley 1989). According to Källkvist (1996) there exist hardly any studies for the acquisition of vocabulary. However Zimmerman (1997) reports that interactive vocabulary instruction accompanied by moderate amounts of self-selected and course-related reading led to gains in vocabulary knowledge. Students' perceptions of how best to learn words corroborated these results. Auerbach and Paxton (1997) report about a student who says that knowing all the words in order to understand the reading makes him lose interest. On the other hand L2 reading research suggests that readers' awareness of their reading processes and strategies enhances proficiency. Compare the Swedish STRIMS report (Tornberg et al 1997).

2. The Input-plus-Output Hypothesis

In his comparative study of the input-only hypothesis on one side and the input-plus-output one on the other, Flahive (1996) claims that these two hypotheses do not differ significantly from each other as regards outcome. He explicitly speaks in favour of input-plus-output because it is eclectic and varied. He says nothing, however, of oral as compared to written output, but no doubt his results correspond to those of Elley et al., who claim that the teaching of English grammar, traditional or transformational, has no influence on the language growth of typical secondary students (Swain 1985, Swain & Lapkin 1995).

There are also claims that a learner's communicative output also contributes to the acquisition of implicit L2 knowledge by pushing the learner to

conform to target language norms. In addition, she/he provides auto-input (Ellis 1994, Swain & Lapkin 1995).

A large number of researchers consider practice-in-production to be useless for language acquisition. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that learners in producing L2 output are sometimes forced into "a more syntactic processing mode than in comprehension, which leads them to notice elements of L2" (Ellis 1994).

DeKeyser, on the other hand, points out that there is very little empirical evidence for the usefulness of practice-in-production in order to increase language acquisition (1996).

According to Spada and Lightbown (1993) and Pienemann (1984) comprehensible input is an essential part of the learning environment, but it will not always be sufficient to bring about increased accuracy. They have seen evidence in their research that form-focused instruction can bring about changes in interlanguage. There may be situations in which learners require focused instruction to further their language acquisition. Learners who are developmentally "ready" to learn a structure can learn it through formal teaching, while those who are not "ready" will not learn it. The same scholars claim that second language acquisition researchers are just beginning to make real progress in understanding how instruction affects the development of linguistic skills and knowledge. They do not suggest, however, that they have found final answers. They argue that in view of the limitations of the existing research, the effect of instruction must be explored further. They hope that teachers will be listening to them as their recommendations become more precise and more complete.

2a. Automatization

DeKeyser (1996) admits that there is no precise documentation of the process of automatization (of rules) through producing language. So far, no research has tried to provide any fine-grained empirical evidence for or against the existence of automatization processes in L2 grammar learning. Nevertheless, the issue of automatization of L2 grammar rules is of crucial importance both to the theory of L2 learning and the practice of L2 teaching, from curriculum design and materials development to the management of classroom activities. According to DeKeyser the time is now ripe to carry out such research. He is obviously trying to repudiate those who contend that linguistic competence is acquired implicitly, but he certainly endorses Krashen et al. in their view that "the effect of grammar learning/teaching is peripheral and fragile" (Krashen 1996) as far as language acquisition increase is concerned. It must be the business of those who claim that automatization occurs as the result of diverse kinds of intensive grammatical practice to provide evidence – not the reverse.

2b. Third Language Acquisition

Second/foreign language acquisition research is an important subfield of

applied linguistics. It is a fact, however, that a large number of people learn a third language, but little research has been carried out on L3 acquisition. Fouser says that it would be important to know how prior language learning experience affects the development of learner attitudes and motivation. The German researchers Selinker (1972) and Tönshoff (1991, 1995) maintain that native-language rules will be carried over by the learner into the target language. Results from research have shown that languages closely cognate with each other are mutually easier to acquire. Learners of related European languages clearly show how the mother tongue/the first language (L1) and L2 affect L3 in comprehension, acquisition and production at varying proficiency levels. Fouser reports on L3 acquisition research which shows that multiple language learning experiences are mutually reinforcing. There is also a reminder that – globally – bilingualism and multilingualism are the norm rather than the exception.

B. READING ACQUISITION PEDAGOGY

1. Principles and background

According to Elley (1989) and Krashen (1993) reading is the foundation of language education and the most powerful tool for increasing vocabulary and ability to read, write, spell, and comprehend. Words are not learnt all at once when they are seen in context. Each time an unfamiliar word is seen in print, a small increase in knowledge occurs. Word knowledge grows in "small increments". Readers do not have to attend to everything on a page of text. To increase vocabulary we need to tolerate some vagueness, which is reduced bit by bit as we read more.

In the *Clockwork Orange* study (Pitts et al 1989) students read a novel with many unique words. They actually learnt the meaning of many of those words from context clues only. Language is too complex to be taught or learnt one rule or item at a time. Picking up word meanings by reading is ten times faster than intensive vocabulary instruction. Motivating texts and, where appropriate, dictionaries are necessary, however.

There is excellent evidence that children can learn to spell without instruction. As early as 1902 Cornman concluded that the effects of spelling instruction were "negligible". We are obsessed by spelling. Writing style and spelling do not come from writing, but from reading, and writing in school appears to be infrequent (Krashen & White 1991, Krashen 1989). Applebee, Langer and Mullis asked students how many essays and reports they had written over six weeks for any school subject. Only 7.8 percent of the eleventh graders wrote more than ten. Writing outside school is not frequent either. The amount of writing done by a typical student is very limited (Applebee et al 1986, 1990).

2. Age-related differences

In her review of recent research on age-related differences in second language acquisition, Källkvist (1996) points to research showing that language

acquisition appears to be most efficient in early years. Apparently, the research primarily refers to aural acquisition. The rate and degree of maturation are crucial to written as well as aural acquisition. Recurrent constraints on language development, maturational or not, but irrespective of age, obviously occur, however, and over time they take the form of ups and downs in the acquisitional process.

3. Reading matter matters

Rehder (1980) reported on spectacular gains in reading comprehension and vocabulary scores for high school students who completed a one-semester course on popular literature. Students were allowed to choose some of the reading from a list. Foertsch (1992) reported that more assigned reading of novels, poems, and stories was associated with better reading achievement. Nagy and Herman (1987) assert that children who acquire a larger than average vocabulary are not doing so simply through better vocabulary lessons; they are doing so by reading.

Traditional language arts instruction is merely a test privileged children pass and that less fortunate children fail. More drills for poor readers do not work. Zimmerman's (1997) findings suggest that the participants agree with Krashen's observation that "many vocabulary teaching methods are at best boring, and are at worst painful". She adds, however, that by focusing students attention to a limited set of lexical features, vocabulary instruction could lead to increased motivation to learn vocabulary.

Scholars like Kim and Krashen (1997) maintain that acquirers need to overcome the ineffective strategies they have developed in foreign language classes, such as looking up every unfamiliar word. Most of these bad habits will disappear gradually as they read easier and more interesting material, but *some* instruction may help. By introducing light reading material nonreaders of English turned into avid readers and made excellent gains in vocabulary and reported improved listening comprehension and fluency. Most acquirers are simply not aware of how powerful reading can be in improving second language competence. In addition, free reading is much more pleasant than traditional instruction.

4. Access to reading material

A print-rich environment affects reading. The most obvious step is to provide easy access to books, paper ones or not, and to a wider variety of books. There is a high correlation – $r = .772$ – between the number of volumes available and the amount of reported reading according to Houle and Montmarquette (1984). Students take more books out of school libraries that have more and stay open longer. Zimmerman (1997) reports that the main reason why students do not read non-required materials is the difficulty of finding good books to read. Increasing library size, e. g. by 20 percent, leads to a loans increase by 175 percent (elementary) and by 83 percent (secondary) (Carson

1990). Magazine reading appears to promote more reading because magazines are the most "reader interest specific" of all mass media and may consequently be the most valuable as stimuli to reading (Carlsen & Sherrill 1988).

After all, according to Zimmerman's recent empirical study vocabulary is the corner-stone of literacy. Lexical issues should constitute a high priority for both teachers and researchers. Vocabulary cannot be left to look after itself (1997).

5. Encouragement

Encouragement to read helps, but "may backfire if the reading material is not appropriate" (Carson 1990). The Ben Carson story of books and reading is a significant example, retold in Krashen's *The Power of Reading*. Carson, a neurosurgeon, was a poor student in the fifth grade when his mother required him to check out two books per week of the library and insisted that he report on his reading to her at the end of each week. He was allowed to read whatever he wanted. He chose books on natural science, reflecting his interests. "I excelled in fifth-grade science; I became the fifth-grade expert in anything of a scientific nature". His mother provided him with just the right amount of direct encouragement.

The Bo Sundblad story is another example, told on his fiftieth birthday by the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*. As a child Sundblad, a reading researcher, took a particular interest in reptiles. Once a poor reader, that dedication of his made him a habitual and successful one.

Conversely, Carlsen and Sherrill (1988) report on distinct lack of enthusiasm for reading because their mothers tried to force books on them which they disliked, either because they were too difficult or they were about subject matter in which they had no interest.

CONCLUSION

Irrespective of the considerable amount of listening acquisition that occurs from infancy throughout the lifetime, reading is the essential means of acquiring language. Reading habits and reading ability are mutually influential. Electronic media are not sufficient or good enough (Bergström 1997). In any case, written and aural comprehensible input is a sine qua non for the ability to speak and write, to increase vocabulary, to ameliorate spelling, and to improve automatization, sentence structure and idiomaticity (Krashen 1994, 1996, 1989, Krashen & White 1987). "Reading at an early age develops the child's brain and brings about ability to acquire and master language. The mind expands along with demand" (Lundqvist 1997).

We need more research, says Juel (1995). When all is said and done, the mode and model of language acquisition are more a matter of proportions than absolutes. In any case, language proficiency increases in direct proportion to the comprehended amount of language intake. Efficiency increases in direct ratio to incentive and motivation. That is the truth and nothing but the truth, albeit not the whole truth: practice makes perfect.

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