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FURTHER THOUGHTS ON LANGUAGE LEARNING AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Introduction

In the last issue of *Teaching and Learning**, I summarised the theories put forward by Krashen in his book *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. In this article I shall evaluate these theories. I shall begin with a brief review of the crucial distinction that Krashen makes between *acquisition* and *learning*.

When making this distinction between language acquisition and language learning, Krashen is arguing that there are two types of knowledge: knowledge that is acquired on the one hand and learnt knowledge on the other. Children acquire their first language and this is a *subconscious* process. Language learning, however, is a *conscious* process. Language learners know, and are able to talk about, the grammatical rules of the language.

Krashen then goes on to argue that of the two processes, acquisition plays the central and more important role. Learning in Krashen's words "has only one function, and that is as a Monitor or editor. Learning comes into play only to make changes in the form of our utterance, after it has been 'produced' by the acquired system" (p 15).

He further argues that a learnt rule cannot be transferred to the acquired store of knowledge. In other words, not only are there two types of knowledge, the acquired and the learnt, but learnt knowledge cannot "enter" the acquired store. These two knowledges are separate and there can be no crossing over of one type of knowledge to the other.

* "Language learning and language acquisition" in *Teaching and Learning*, vol 5, no. 1, July 1984.

These two claims – that the role conscious learning plays is of relatively minor importance when compared with the role acquisition plays, and that there can be no transfer of knowledge from the learnt store to the acquired – have met with criticism. I shall now consider the first claim.

The Role of Conscious Learning

In my opinion, the role that conscious learning plays varies dramatically depending on the *age* of the students. Although conscious learning does not play an important part in a child's acquisition of his first language, it does play an important part in an adult's learning of a second or foreign language. Adults use a conceptual system and they think consciously about the language they are learning. Conscious learning is an important adult strategy. Sharwood-Smith (1981) has pointed out that it is very difficult to deny adult learners explicit information about the language they are learning since their intellectual maturity makes them cry out for explanations. A teacher, therefore, who refuses to provide adult learners with some explicit information about the language, is denying them an important learning strategy. Krashen denies them this strategy.

Conscious learning also plays an important role in situations where the language learners only have access to the language they are learning in the classroom. Such learners have no opportunity to listen to or practise the language outside the classroom. Where the environment provides few models for acquisition, then formal learning becomes more important. That many learners are nevertheless able to learn the language to a surprising degree of fluency is evidence of formal learning's role in language learning.

Krashen has underestimated the importance of conscious learning. I shall now discuss the second of Krashen's claims.

The Transfer of Learnt Knowledge to the Acquired Store

Krashen's claim is that conscious learning in the classroom does not aid acquisition. In other words, if a learner learns a rule and then later correctly uses it in spontaneous conversation, the claim is that he is not using the rule correctly because he has learnt it earlier, but because he has acquired the rule following some

other route. This, in Krashen's view, must be so, as learnt knowledge can never be transferred to the acquired store.

This claim is counter-intuitive. It seems far more reasonable to argue that if structures that have been formally learnt appear later in students' performance, it is because they have been learnt earlier. It therefore seems reasonable to argue that learnt knowledge can be transferred to the acquired store. Conscious learning, therefore, can and does help acquisition. As Ellis (1982) has suggested, "communicative activities are useful precisely because they provide a switch that starts the flow of learnt to acquired knowledge" (p 80). Sharwood-Smith (1981) agrees, arguing that there is every reason to accept the version of language learning which says that explicit knowledge may aid acquisition via practice.

Although Krashen's theories have met with criticism in the two areas discussed above, it would be wrong to suggest that his theories have been rejected wholesale. On the contrary, much of what he has proposed has been accepted. The importance Krashen attaches to providing materials for students that are interesting, relevant and comprehensible goes unchallenged. It must be said, however, that there cannot be many good teachers who do not always try to provide such materials. Similarly, many language teachers now accept that the focus of such materials should be on the *message* that the materials contain, and that they should not concentrate solely on the grammatical forms that convey the message. Furthermore, many teachers will also agree with Krashen's view that a classroom atmosphere that allows students to feel at ease rather than apprehensive, is an atmosphere to strive for, as it facilitates language learning.

Conclusion and Implications

Much of what Krashen has proposed has been accepted. Two main criticisms, however, have been made. The first is that Krashen underestimates the role conscious learning can play, especially with adult learners. The second is that Krashen's insistence that learnt knowledge cannot be transferred to the acquired store seems counter-intuitive. Until evidence is provided to support this claim, it should be viewed with caution.

This could be summed up by saying that while many of Krashen's *ideas* seem sensible, his *theories* seem flawed.

Rather than completely accepting Krashen's theories at this stage, therefore, it would be more sensible to adopt what Harmer (1983) has called a "multi-faceted approach". Both acquisition and learning are important and one should not be neglected at the expense of the other. The relative weight that acquisition and learning will carry in a course will depend on the students and the teaching situation. A language course that combines exercises in fluency (acquisition) and accuracy (learning) is likely to be more successful for adults than one which overlooks accuracy. On the other hand, a course that neglects fluency and concentrates on accuracy is not likely to be successful for child learners.

The question that now arises is "when does a person become an adult?" Clearly, at the primary level, the main emphasis of a language course should be on acquisition and fluency exercises as children of this age have yet to develop the intellectual maturity to use conscious learning as a learning strategy. At the secondary level, however, and especially at upper secondary, the comparative intellectual maturity of students could be exploited. If such students demand some explicit information about the language they are learning, then it should be provided to them.

A further point needs to be made here. As in formal written work all productions are likely to be inspected and monitored by reference to learnt knowledge, conscious learning is clearly important. An upper secondary course should strike a balance therefore between conscious learning and acquisition exercises. This, however, is not to say that acquisition and fluency exercises can be neglected. A combination of both fluency and accuracy exercises is required.

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