

Helping ESL Students Improve Their Writing

Comprehensible Input

Acquisition occurs when comprehensible input in the target language is available. Just as babies acquire language from the surrounding environment without studying grammar books and dictionaries, second language learners acquire language from interacting with other language users. Krashen argues that we acquire by understanding language that contains structure a bit beyond our current level of competence through the help of context or extra-linguistic information. We acquire best by "going for meaning" first, and as a result, we acquire structure.

In Krashen's view, simplified codes--caretaker speech, foreigner talk, teacher talk--facilitate acquisition by making input more comprehensible. In fact, for Krashen, because direct teaching of rules and forms is not useful, the main task of a language teacher is to facilitate language acquisition by creating the proper linguistic environment. Many teachers have found this role to be overly limited.

The Monitor

Krashen does admit that conscious learning can be used to modify output to some degree, if the following conditions are met: If the speaker or writer has the time to apply such knowledge, if the situation calls for or triggers a focus on form, and if the speaker or writer has knowledge of the rule. He calls this function the monitor.

Non-interface Position

Krashen's insistence on the lack of connection between conscious learning and unconscious acquisition has been characterized by Rod Ellis as the "non-interface" position. Other linguists posit some kind of interface between acquisition and learning. William Rutherford, for example, stakes out a compromise position in which acquisition is still the most powerful factor in second language mastery. However, Rutherford believes that conscious attention to grammatical forms or other features can produce "consciousness raising" which can guide acquisition.

Interlanguage

Essential to Rutherford's position is the concept of "interlanguage." An "interlanguage" is a structured grammatical system, constructed by the learner, which approximates the grammatical system of the language being acquired. As acquisition proceeds, the interlanguage system evolves into a better approximation of the standard system. In Rutherford's model, this evolution proceeds through "hypothesis testing," and thus highlighting or focusing on specific differences or mismatches between the learner's interlanguage system and the standard grammatical system can facilitate hypothesis formation and testing.

In practice, language acquisition theory means that reading and listening to a large amount of comprehensible English is essential to improving a student's English language ability. Rutherford's revision of this theory means that highlighting specific points at which the student's interlanguage system is at variance with a native-speaker's grammatical system can help that student form a better hypothesis about how that particular part of the system works, and facilitate acquisition of the proper forms.

For Further Reading

Rod Ellis's *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* is an excellent review and analysis of competing language acquisition theories. Stephen Krashen's *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* sets out his theory and the research behind it, while *Writing: Research, Theory and Application* applies language acquisition theory to writing issues. William E. Rutherford's *Second Language Grammar: Learning and Teaching* is an interesting and well-argued investigation of the role of grammar in language teaching.