



Autumn 2006

Achievement
Profile: Sonia
Nieto

Steve Wolf

Life After
TESL

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Teacher
Mourned in
Wichita

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ESL MiniConference

The Great Debate: Conscious vs. Unconscious Language Learning

From the ESL MiniConference Archives

In the late spring of 2002, the ESL MiniConference hosted an impromptu exchange of several articles between Robert O'Neill and Stephen Krashen regarding the role of conscious learning in second language acquisition. Bill VanPatten also joined the debate, and a number of ESL MiniConference readers joined the fray, too. In addition, later in the year, the Sendai chapter of the Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) made the O'Neill-Krashen exchanges the center of their monthly meeting.

Achievement Profile of Robert O'Neill
(includes his challenge to unconscious-learning proponents)

<http://www.eslminiconf.net/april/oneill.html>

Unconscious Learning Crucial For Adult Competence, Says Stephen
Krashen

(reply to O'Neill's challenge)

<http://www.eslminiconf.net/april/krashenreply.html>

My Debt to - And Argument With - Stephen Krashen

(Robert O'Neill's rebuttal of Steve Krashen's reply)

<http://www.eslminiconf.net/april/oneillreply.html>

Comment's on O'Neill's Debt to and Argument with Krashen
(Krashen responds to O'Neill's criticisms)

<http://www.eslminiconf.net/may/krashenreply.html>

Giving Adult Language Learners Wings to Fly (and Acquire)

(Bill VanPatten responds to Robert O'Neill's Criticisms of SLA)

<http://www.eslminiconf.net/may/story4.html>

Achieving Enough Lift - But Without Too Much Drag

(O'Neill offers a rebuttal to VanPatten's reply)

<http://www.eslminiconf.net/may/oneillreply.html>

Also available:

Bill VanPatten's two keynotes from KATESOL 2004

<http://www.eslminiconf.net/katesol/spring2004/vanpattenA/>

<http://www.eslminiconf.net/katesol/spring2004/vanpattenB/>

The O'Neill-Krashen exchanges continued on the ESL MiniConference letters page, at

<http://www.eslminiconf.net/mail2002q2.html>

Re: Stephen Krashen's second response, Acquisition and Learning
Two quotes from Judith R Strozer's LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AFTER PUBERTY (Georgetown University Press, 1994, p.p. 186-187) put the matter succinctly. "The well-known facts cited in Chapter 7 suggest that linguistic parameter setting is possible only for a brain undergoing maturation at a particularly (early) stage." "The conclusion that a foreign language can be acquired only through persistent study, and that a teaching program can only provide valuable but never sufficient help, is neither negative nor pessimistic."

Despite Strozer's use of "acquisition" here, I still think that the word is inherently misleading. If the parameter setting that drives acquisition in a child is not possible for an adult, the word "acquire" does not describe what even the best adult learners attain or the way they learn. I also believe, however, that what I understand as learning and what Krashen calls acquisition can result in highly tutored intuitions that go way beyond axiomatic rules and which may not involve them at all.

Grammar and Conscious Learning

As a textbook author, I use grammar as a supplement to comprehensible input. I have never believed that grammar alone is enough, just as I have never believed that what is learned through grammar can be a complete rule system. It cannot be, as even St. Augustine, and Erasmus knew. However grammar can - if used discretely and wisely (by learners as well as teachers) - promote and sharpen those intuitions we develop primarily but not only through comprehensible input. Of course, all this is and must be, in Krashen's words, "an empirical question, open to investigation". His reply has been, as always, illuminating.

Robert O'Neill

Author, Teacher, and Language-Learner

In response to Robert O'Neill's letter, Acquisition and Learning:
Obviously, I strongly disagree with Strozer's conclusion that parameter resetting is impossible after a certain time and that "persistent study" is necessary for language acquisition in adults.

Interestingly I agree with O'Neill that grammar has a contribution to make, and that there are limits to what these contributions are. Our views on how grammar helps may be quite different, however. I maintain it is only available as a monitor or editor, and that severe conditions must be met for conscious grammar to be applied: time to apply the rule, knowledge of the rule, and a focus on form. For most

people, these conditions are only met after they have had some instruction and are taking a grammar test. This is when you see the full impact of grammar, and even then the effect is modest. The original arguments are available in *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* (1982), and I have discussed this more recently in an article in *Foreign Language Annals* in 1999, and it will be part of a chapter in a new book.

But even this modest contribution of grammar can be helpful. Our standards in writing are 100%. A single spelling or punctuation error in public can mean humiliation (as former US Vice President Quayle discovered a few years ago). Even well-read people don't acquire all of a language. There are usually a few gaps. In English this includes the it's/its distinction, who/whom, etc, places where, I suspect, the language is changing.

I recommend study of grammar for older students in both first and second languages, focusing on the use of a grammar handbook, to fill these gaps. It is part of language study, but is peripheral.

Stephen Krashen

University of Southern California

Other letters from readers...

Re: O'Neill-Krashen-VanPatten debate,

I took up the suggestion of the kind List member who posted the ESL MiniConference website on the debate on learning vs acquisition. It's really pretty short and no one says anything outrageous. It would be a succinct introduction for those who don't want to read a book or article and would lay to rest the notion that grammar shouldn't be taught, etc. I think Bill VanPatten's reply is extremely helpful. Those who claim we shouldn't teach grammar just don't understand communicative teaching.

One example: a teacher in my district was upset that the curriculum did not contain specific grammar features to be taught at specific points; you know, the preterite in November and the subjunctive in April (actually, come to think of it, that's just about how it turns out in my classes). The grammar was there, but as an appendage: you teach it where you need it to enhance communication, not as an end in itself.

She was upset with me because she knew I rejected the notion of teaching a language by going from grammar feature to grammar feature, yet I'll bet she teaches her kids how to function in the language; she just can't believe she is teaching "language" when her students are understanding and using the language - teaching the language to her

means teaching the grammar.

Pat Barrett

Re: SLA Debate,

Thank you so much for bringing this wonderful debate to the attention of the NIFL-ESL list. My area of interest is adult SLA, so it was particularly fascinating to me. I especially enjoyed Bill VanPatten's contribution. He makes it clear that there is indeed a distinction between learning and acquisition, but O'Neill misses the mark in his theory about where that distinction lies.

Lorraine Dutton

Re: Krashen-O'Neill-VanPatten debate

Thanks....I printed the exchanges and plan to use the material in my grad classes. The debate should generate lots of heated discussion....

Diane Epstein

Re: the Krashen-O'Neill debate,

As usual, I find myself totally on O'Neill's side, though I suspect the two are closer than the forced polarity suggests... Those of us like myself who have 'plateaued' in Japanese know only too well the limitations of acquisition for adults. I've also known adults master a language quicker than children - by 'learning' rather than acquisition.

I was heartened too to find O'Neill supporting one of my own pet peeves when he writes of such 'childish and sterile dogmas as 'teacher-centred is BAD' and 'learner-centred is GOOD' - IMHO classroom time is too often wasted in ineffective learner-centred work (invariably carried out in the students native language), though on teacher training courses it is probably heresy to say so... I well remember having TTT (teacher talking time) being drummed into me as an evil that should be reduced to a minimum, a dogma that incidentally conflicts with Krashen's need for massive amounts of comprehensible input...

John Dougill

Re: the Robert O'Neill interview,

I once taught with American Kernel Lessons, when teaching tired adult immigrants in the evenings, and found it to be an excellent book as far as the success that it elicited from tired students. Many ESL teachers would find it hopelessly repetitive, but it certainly did the trick for a lot of my students -- some of whom were 60 years old, heavily burdened by family responsibilities, etc. I left class every evening feeling exhilarated by what they had been able to do with the materials.

Margaret Scheirman (going on 22 years of ESL teaching)

Minnesota English Center, University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Re: John Dougill's comment,
John Dougill points out that forbidding teacher talk is contrary to
Krashen's need for massive amounts of comprehensible input. I agree.

Stephen Krashen
Emeritus Professor
University of Southern California

2006 ESL MiniConference Online



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