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KRASHEN'S SECOND-LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORY AND THE TEACHING OF EDITED AMERICAN ENGLISH

Recent research in composition theory has provided writing teachers with an abundance of information and techniques for teaching most parts of the writing process. They have only to pick up a journal or attend a conference in order to be supplied with the latest ideas on everything from heuristics, to conferencing, to teaching revising through word processing. When teaching the mechanics of writing, to help students gain control of Edited American English (EAE), however, many writing teachers feel at a loss. On this topic, one research study after another has shown that the formal study of grammar does not improve students' writing.[1] Writing teachers know, in fact, that the deviations from EAE in their students' papers are apt to be the most distracting and damning flaws to general readers and perhaps to many professors as well. Faced with this situation, what are writing teachers to do? One answer is that instead of basing their pedagogy exclusively on the results of group comparison studies[2] or on personal conviction grounded in experience, they can turn for guidance to research on language acquisition. Particularly useful in this regard is the second-language acquisition theory of Stephen D. Krashen which has major implications for the teaching of writing in the first language.

Central to Krashen's theory of second-language acquisition is his distinction between language *acquisition* and language *learning*, a distinction which other second-language acquisition researchers have called "perhaps the most important conceptualization in the field and [one which] has made possible the most productive models of SLA [second-

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language acquisition] yet developed" (Tollefson, Jacobs, and Selipsky 1). According to Krashen, acquisition is a subconscious process while learning is conscious. Although both play a role in developing second-language competence, acquisition is far more important, since the competence developed through it, is responsible for generating language and thus accounts for language fluency. Competence gained through learning, or the "Monitor" as Krashen terms it, can only modify language generated by acquired language competence. In other words, the second-language student can use learned rules to "monitor" or correct his language either before or after the moment of production. Monitoring serves a limited function, however, since it can operate only when there is sufficient time, when the focus is on form, and when the necessary rule has been learned. Normally these rather limited conditions are met chiefly when a person is writing or taking a discrete-point grammar test.

According to Krashen, learned competence and acquired competence develop in very different ways. In his view, language learning occurs through the formal study of rules, patterns, and conventions, a study which enables one to talk about and consciously apply the knowledge gained. Language acquisition, however, occurs quite differently, for it develops *exclusively*, Krashen believes, through "comprehensible input." That is, second-language students acquire language competence by exposure to language that is both understandable and meaningful to them. By concentrating on meaning, they subconsciously acquire form. The most valuable input for acquisition is language that goes just a step beyond the structures which second-language students have already acquired (or, in Krashen's terminology, i + 1, where i represents language at the students' current level of competence). No matter how appropriate the input, however, acquisition will not occur if a student's "affective filter," or collection of emotional responses that impede comprehension of meaning, is raised. Importantly, Krashen insists that learning does not turn into acquisition except in a certain convoluted way. This can occur only if second-language students successfully monitor their language production so that they provide their own grammatically correct comprehensible input. This self-produced input then becomes part of the total necessary for acquisition to take place (Krashen, *Principles and Practice* 9-124; Krashen and Terrell 7-62).

Obviously first-language acquisition is not identical with second-language acquisition, but there is evidence which suggests Krashen's formulation of the second-language acquisition process may be highly significant for first-language writing teachers. To begin with, much of Krashen's work accords with, indeed derives from, research in first-language acquisition, especially research which points to the importance of the comprehensible input supplied by the caretakers of young children. Furthermore, his prime evidence for the existence of the Monitor parallels the observed behavior of the first-language writing students. Krashen posits the existence of the Monitor largely upon studies based on the discovery that people, both children and adults, acquire the morphemes of a

second language in a remarkably similar order. Alterations in this natural order can be observed, however, when subjects receive formal instruction in late-acquired morphemes (the -s ending of English third-person singular present-tense verbs, for example) and then are given tests which require them to focus on form with ample time to respond. Under these conditions, they are able to supply morphemes which they have not yet shown evidence of acquiring. If these subjects are subsequently placed in situations where the emphasis is on communication, rather than form, they revert to the natural order of morpheme acquisition. All this suggests to Krashen that competence gained through learning is distinct from that gained through acquisition and that the former, the Monitor, manifests itself only when the focus is on form and there is sufficient time (*Principles and Practice* 12-25).

The results of these morpheme-studies are quite similar to the oft-observed phenomenon of first-language writing students completing grammar exercises perfectly and yet failing to transfer to their own papers the knowledge used in completing the exercises. They also seem pertinent to the studies indicating that formal study of grammar does not improve first-language students' writing abilities. In both cases students are generally unable to make use of formal knowledge of rules in situations where the emphasis is on meaning rather than form, thus implying a differentiation between learned and acquired grammatical competence in first-language students as well.[3] This conclusion is supported by William Labov's observations of many educated Black speakers who spoke nonstandard English as children, learned standard English later, and are usually able through "audio-monitoring" to maintain it in their speech, but slip back into the vernacular when they are "tired, or distracted, or unable to hear" themselves or, conversely, when "intensely excited, emotionally disturbed, or very much involved in the subject" (35), in other words, when conditions are not conducive to monitoring.

Stimulated by the apparent parallels between Krashen's theory of second-language acquisition and the process of first-language acquisition, a number of researchers have begun to apply Krashen's work to the development of first-language writing skills.[4] Included among these is Krashen himself. In this monograph *Writing: Research, Theory, and Applications*, Krashen hypothesizes that writing competence in the first language develops in the same way as second-language competence, that is, through exposure to comprehensible input. In the case of writing, however, it is reading that supplies the comprehensible input: "Writing competence . . . comes only from large amounts of self-motivated reading for interest and/or pleasure" (*Writing* 20). Much of Krashen's discussion of writing centers on the acquisition of the principles of rhetorical structure rather than features of EAE. He says when reading fails to provide all the necessary rules and conventions of grammar and punctuation, at least some can be taught for use in editing. In other words, teachers can help students fill in the gaps left by incomplete acquisition of EAE by teaching for conscious rule-learning (*Writing* 35). It seems to me, though, that Krashen's work, especially his theory of second-language acquisi-

tion, has far more wide-reaching implications for writing teachers seeking to improve their students' control of EAE.

At first consideration, it might seem that since writing provides sufficient time for monitoring, writing teachers should instruct their students in as many of the rules and conventions of EAE as possible, should load their Monitors up so to speak, and then help them turn their attention to form by encouraging or even insisting on careful editing. Such thinking contains several problems, however. First of all, as Krashen notes, only a few of the rules that govern any language, including English, have been described by linguists and of these, even fewer are known by the best teachers and so can be successfully taught to most of their students. Many writing teachers well-versed in traditional grammar have discovered this to be true when they have attempted to explain to ESL students the nature of their errors, only to find that they themselves do not know the rule that applies. Closely allied to this point is the fact that many rules are neither "learnable" (capable of being easily understood) nor "portable" (capable of being carried around in one's head and applied readily). Particularly telling is Krashen's observation that many people apply learned rules incorrectly, often overgeneralizing (*Principles and Practice* 92-97). This phenomenon can be found in both the *he can talks* of the dialect speaker who has just learned the standard third-person singular present-tense form and the hypercorrect *between him and I* of certain learned speakers who are overtaught the use of the nominative form. There is also some evidence that the rules of traditional grammar can be understood and applied only if they have been previously acquired (Hartwell 119-20). Add to all this the difficulty people often experience in shifting their attention from the meaning of what they have written to its form and the impracticality of their retaining a great many rules in their minds, and a picture of the sizable limitations of rule-learning appears.

In view, therefore, of the limitations and even drawbacks to conscious rule-learning, applying Krashen's theory does not lead to teaching—for conscious use—as many features of EAE as possible. Instead, his work, with its focus on the power of acquisition and the weaknesses of learning, suggests that writing teachers seeking to improve their students' control of EAE should emphasize language acquisition much more than they usually do. This does not mean that they should never teach for learning, for in some situations it is the most practical approach, but rather that they should recognize the limitations of such instruction and employ it only when necessary. In this regard, Krashen's work provides a valuable tool that can be used both to analyze and evaluate a number of pedagogical practices and to help construct a coherent philosophy of instruction in EAE. In the remainder of this paper I will discuss a number of teaching techniques in the light of Krashen's model of second-language acquisition, indicating both those which would seem to help students make use of and develop further their acquired language competence and those which appear to impede it.

Since Krashen's research indicates that acquired competence is so much more accessible and reliable than learned competence, teachers should help students exploit their acquired competence in whatever ways possible. One way of doing this is to teach students editing "tricks" that draw upon their ear for language. One such trick is covering up the first item in a compound prepositional object to check for proper pronoun use. For example, covering up *John and* in the phrase *to John and I* will immediately show most students that *me*, not *I*, is required in that location. Students can also be taught, in the manner described by Kathy Martin, to read a paper backwards from the last sentence to the first in order to "hear" fragments (4) and to expand contractions in order to determine if they work in a particular construction. The techniques developed by Robert DeBeaugrande, which build upon the "grammar of talk" or the unconscious knowledge of grammar used in everyday conversation, provide further examples of ways students can use their acquired competence in editing their papers. For instance, DeBeaugrande instructs students who have difficulty recognizing fragments to try to turn a "sentence" into a question which can be answered with a *yes* or *no*. If this is impossible, the collection of words in question is a dependent clause or some other construction, rather than a complete sentence (358-67). All of these "tricks," and many others which individual writing teachers have undoubtedly developed, possess the great advantage that they do not rely upon knowledge of terminology and rules which may be difficult to understand and learn, frequently incomplete or misleading, and easily misapplied. Rather, they build upon a sophisticated body of knowledge which students have already acquired.

But what if students' acquisition of certain constructions seems incomplete or practically nonexistent? In these instances, teachers can encourage acquisition through avoiding certain pedagogical techniques and employing certain other ones. Chief among techniques to avoid when teaching for acquisition is the use of what Thomas Friedmann calls "error-based" exercises (391).[5] These are exercises which require students to choose the correct form out of several incorrect alternatives or to locate and correct the errors of grammar, punctuation, or usage in a passage. Through their input of erroneous or nonstandard forms, such exercises impede rather than promote students' acquisition of standard forms. Instead of teaching students, they merely test whether they are able, through either acquired or learned competence, to supply the correct forms.

In place of error-based exercises, it is far preferable to use students' own papers when teaching for acquisition. Rather than labeling their errors, however, and explaining how to correct them, teachers can discuss their students' sentences in terms of the confused or ambiguous meaning they convey. For instance, they can describe the ambiguity created for them as readers by a misplaced modifier without ever mentioning the term. Similarly, stumbling when reading out loud a sentence that lacks proper punctuation illustrates the appropriate placement of a comma

far more powerfully than a lecture on its various uses. Once aware of how their sentence structure or punctuation interferes with their communication of meaning, students can then, with assistance, attempt to repair them. In this way, they can strengthen their somewhat shaky acquisition of certain structures. Julia Falk helps to explain how this occurs when she describes the importance of errors in language acquisition: "Only through errors can the learner test hypotheses, revise them, and continue to develop" (441). By discovering through readers' responses that certain structures do not convey the intended meaning, students are encouraged to reformulate some of their hypotheses about the language. To the extent that this process is subconscious, acquisition occurs.

This method works well with a number of errors including misplaced or dangling modifiers, ambiguous pronoun reference, incorrect verb tense, faulty comparatives, and faulty or missing punctuation. For sentences that are more badly mangled, containing errors of the sort David Carkeet calls "strange" because of their resistance to categorization according to the usual handbook labels (682), a slightly different method is in order. Some examples of sentences of this sort follow:

"But I've come to realize that in the neighborhood where I was living was not a place for ladies especially at night."

"It is not overall change throughout these five years in Key Club that I have shown to be mature."

"But there is a limit that each one person want to do what he or she should do something by oneself and don't need any advice from anybody."

"But now, after realizing how important it is to be myself, that I see how much I have matured." [6]

For these sentences, simple discussion is again helpful. In dealing with "strange" errors, however, teachers cannot simply describe how part of the sentence is misleading because often the meaning of the entire sentence is garbled. Instead, the teacher must ask what the student meant by the sentence. When explaining, the student will often state another sentence which can be substituted for the original. If not, the teacher can try through questions and suggestions to lead the student to revise the sentence successfully. Here Valerie Krishna's observation that the logical subject of these "strange" sentences often appears in "prepositional phrases, object noun clauses, adjectives, adverbs, or other ancillary parts of the sentence" and her suggestions for helping students improve them can be useful (130). If the student is unable, even with help, to revise the sentence, the teacher may suggest a revised version. It is extremely important that the teacher's version conform to the student's intended meaning. Often I have thought I understood a garbled sentence, only to discover through conversation with its student-writer that I did not at all. If I had merely inserted my revised version, I would not have helped since my grammatically correct sentence would not have expressed the student's intended meaning. It is also important, when revising such sentences, to use as much of the original grammatical structure and wording as possible. The aim is to supply Krashen's i + 1, not the best possible version of the sentence.

Krashen states that a teacher can promote acquisition by providing students with appropriate comprehensible input. The only alternative procedure for language teachers which he describes is that of presenting students with a rule and then helping them practice applying it, a procedure which leads of course to learning. It is difficulty to believe, however, that discussions of how meaning can be expressed, especially when that discussion does not include complex terminology and sophisticated analyses of how syntax went astray and thus does not turn the attention to form, would not aid in facilitating acquisition. Obviously discussing and revising one sentence in this way would be far from sufficient for acquisition to occur, but it would provide one more bit of comprehensible input, a bit that presumably would be particularly powerful since it would constitute the student's own meaning, expressed, with some assistance, by the student himself or herself.

Some errors, however, are not amenable to this approach since they merely distract attention rather than disrupt meaning. Often these errors are in items that convey redundant information. The -*s* ending on third-person singular verbs, for example, is redundant because the person and number are also carried by the noun or pronoun subject. Other items of this sort include the -*ed* ending of past-tense and past-participle forms, subject-verb agreement, possessive forms, some conventional forms of punctuation such as the placement of quotation marks, and certain commonly confused words such as *their/there* and *its/it's*. For errors on these items, writing teachers cannot concentrate on meaning in hopes of facilitating acquisition. Instead they must either wait for acquisition to occur naturally, if at all, or decide to teach for learning.

For teachers who choose the latter alternative, Krashen is again instructive, particularly in his description of the limitations of the Monitor and his resulting advice to teach for conscious use only simple, straightforward rules which are both "learnable" and "portable." Of course, what is learnable and portable for one student may not be for another. By keeping in mind Krashen's description of how the Monitor functions, as well as their own estimations of their students' conscious knowledge, teachers can determine the appropriateness of attempting to teach a particular rule to a particular student. It would be a waste of time, for example, to try to teach the *whoever/whomever* distinction to a student who has difficulty picking out subjects and verbs in simple sentences.

Krashen's emphasis on the limitations of the Monitor or learned competence also suggests that teachers should present rules in the way that makes them easiest to apply, that cuts down as much as possible on the amount of mental activity necessary to retrieve and employ them. This implies that teachers should not use contrast to teach features of EAE, as Friedmann observes in a different context (393-96). It may seem eminently reasonable to teach *it's* in contrast with *its*, but a student taught in this manner will forever associate the two and be forced to sort out the meaning of both before choosing one. Similarly, contrasting the plural -*s* ending of nouns with the singular -*s* ending of verbs only obfuscates

a point which is difficult enough for many students. An extension of this principle is that only one variation of a rule should be taught at a time. A student whose papers are replete with one type of subject-verb disagreement will be needlessly confused, not enlightened, by a comprehensive lecture on all the rules for subject-verb agreement.

Instead of instructing by contrast, it is often possible, even when teaching for learning, to blend inductive methods relying on acquired competence with overt rule-teaching. For example, the teacher can present a passage written in the present perfect to a student who regularly omits the -*ed* ending of this form and then ask the student about the time frame conveyed by the verbs. If the student answers correctly, the teacher can then point out the form of the verbs, particularly the -*ed* ending. In this way the teacher links the student's acquired sense of meaning with the standard form.[7] The student can then practice the form by completing non-error-based exercises. Controlled composition exercises in which students change instances of one form throughout a passage to another form (simple past tense to present perfect, for example) work well for this.[8] It can also be effective to have students write a paragraph or short paper on a topic that elicits the form just presented and then to ask them to underline and check for correctness all instances of the form. Both types of exercises are superior to the usual handbook sort of exercise in that they require students to manipulate language rather than merely fill in the blank or choose the correct answer.

Helpful though they may be, these exercises are still exercises. When completing them, students' focus is on form; they are working in a context in which it is relatively easy to monitor or apply conscious learning. It is therefore important that teachers help students learn to monitor effectively when they are editing their own papers for those items they have learned consciously. One way of doing this is through what might be termed guided editing. As teacher and student read together the student's paper, the student corrects any errors. If the student skips over an error in a rule or convention discussed previously, the teacher comments on it in a manner designed to reflect the way the rule was presented. As much as possible, these comments should yoke meaning with form. For instance, if the student omits the -*ed* ending of a past tense verb, the teacher can say, "You seem to be describing an event that occurred in the past. What form of this verb do you use for an action in the past?" When such a union of meaning and form is impossible, the teacher can refer to the appropriate rule in the simplest possible form. An omitted -s on a present-tense verb with a third-person singular subject, for example, might prompt the teacher to state, "The verb in this sentence is in the present tense and its subject is *she*. What form of the verb do you need to use?" In subsequent sessions, the teacher can encourage greater student independence in discovering and correcting errors by indicating only the word(s), line, or sentence in which the error appears and letting the student attempt to determine the exact nature and appropriate correction of the error. If the student has difficulty, the teacher can provide the required assistance.

Work of this sort on errors in items not easily taught for acquisition can be coupled with the techniques described above which encourage acquisition. That is, teachers can also refer to editing "tricks," discuss the ambiguous or confused meaning in student sentences resulting from errors in EAE, and rework garbled sentences with their writers. By talking students through their papers in this manner, teachers act on the belief that errors in student papers do not require a reteaching of the rules broken or more workbook exercises. Rather, they indicate students' need for guided practice in editing their own papers, practice of a sort which is designed to strengthen developing acquisition whenever possible and to promote automatic and accurate monitoring when not.

Of course, guided editing can be employed only when teachers have the luxury of working individually with students in either a conference or writing-center setting. When teachers' responses to student papers must be confined to written comments, Richard Haswell's system of "minimal marking" can be helpful. In this system, the teacher places a check next to a line in a student's paper in which an error in EAE occurs. Two errors warrant two checks, and so on. Then, fifteen minutes before the end of a class, the teacher returns the papers to the students with instructions that they find, circle, and correct the errors. Haswell estimates that when he uses this method, students are able to correct sixty to seventy percent of their errors. He does not distinguish between acquisition and learning, but uses instead the word "conceptual" to refer to errors resulting from both incomplete acquisition and incomplete learning. Nevertheless, he speculates that students are able to correct many of their errors because they are "threshold errors" which "occupy a kind of halfway house between purely conceptual and purely performance-based" (602). This suggests that his method promotes development of both acquired and learned competence. In other words, "minimal marking" encourages students to refine their hypotheses constituting acquired knowledge or reminds them to apply their learned knowledge. In this way, it functions similarly to guided editing, although less directively. By demonstrating which errors students are unable to correct on their own, it provides a means of winnowing down the number of errors that need to be dealt with more explicitly in a guided editing session.

These suggestions do not of course include all the possible applications of Krashen's work to the teaching of EAE, nor are the specific practices I recommend generally original with me. My debt to others is obvious. What I have tried to do, however, is to indicate how Krashen's work can be used to blend isolated practices that many teachers have found effective, into a consistent, logical approach to teaching EAE, an approach based on a well-substantiated theory of language acquisition. Certainly Krashen's work cannot answer all the questions writing teachers have about teaching EAE. It does not, for example, explain the differences between acquisition from oral language and from written and their pedagogical significance. It does not take into consideration students' different learning styles; might, for instance, a visually oriented student be

expected to acquire more readily from written discourse than one more aurally attuned? It also has little to say about the barriers which often intrude between language competence and language performance and the ways teachers might seek to remove them. As Krashen and others complete more research, presumably they will answer more of these questions and perhaps modify certain details of his theory.[9] Whatever the changes, Krashen's model of second-language acquisition should remain extremely useful for writing teachers because of its vivid distinction between the two sorts of language competence, acquired and learned, that their students possess, and particularly because of its delineation of the power and desirability of acquisition, the limitations of learning, and hence the desirability of teaching as much as possible for acquisition.

Notes

[1]Kolln warns, however, that before accepting in full the conclusions of these studies, we should review critically their research designs.

[2]For a description of the inadequacies of group comparison studies, see Newkirk (48).

[3]Of course the opposite can occur: Students can become so preoccupied with rules that they are unable to write. (See Rose.)

[4]See Winterowd, "Developing" and "From Classroom Practice," also Pringle.

[5]Although Friedmann never refers to Krashen, his recommendations throughout his article are very much in accordance with Krashen's theory.

[6]These sentences were taken from placement essays written by entering SUNY-Binghamton students in Fall, 1981.

[7]For other discussions of the advantages of inductive learning, see D'Eloia (238-241); Fraser and Hodson (51); and Shaughnessy (129-30).

[8]For a description of controlled composition, see Gorrell.

[9]Stevick has proposed a modification which posits a more complex interplay between acquired and learned competence than that described by Krashen (270-279).

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