Krashen & Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory - a re-evaluation of how to teach classical languages.

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IN THIS PAPER I have three aims: to briefly summarise some aspects of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, with particular respect to the work of Stephen Krashen; to survey something of the history of methodology in SLA; to examine standard grammar-translation and inductive reading approaches that are prevalent in the teaching of classical languages.

A brief history of methodology

The learning of additional languages has been going on as long as there have been multiple languages and interactions between linguistically diverse groups. That people readily learn second, third, and many languages, without formal education, is also evident from any contact with polyglot cultures.

A brief historical glance at language teaching is vital for understanding our present situation. Throughout the Middle Ages and into the modern period in Europe, Latin was used as an active language for communication. Into the 1500s Latin was taught primarily through the means of Latin, with some reference to the vernacular, but with little reference to grammar. This was, in part, because there was a real societal use for Latin: to not only read texts, but to engage in international conversation, attend university, write respectable works, and so on. Latin had a communicative purpose so teaching was tailored to that purpose. Not to say that grammar was not taught, but grammar was its own area of study.

And yet the decline of Latin culturally was matched by two other factors: the rise of grammatical studies within linguistics, and a shift in the teaching of languages. Firstly, grammar came to be seen as the key to language, so handbooks and textbooks came increasingly to reflect this in teaching Latin as a language to be understood by grammar plus lexicon, which were the tools that enabled translation plus analysis.[1]

Students, from all accounts, as part of this transition struggled further and further to obtain the communicative mastery of prior ages, since the methods by which they were taught did not aim for that, even if the goal was such mastery. What was the 'traditional' method of communicative teaching quickly became forgotten, and so the present suspicion of communicative approaches to language teaching in our own day is historically naive.

Recent work in SLA

Stephen Krashen is a linguist whose major work has been in the field of SLA. The basics of his approach are readily understandable, and for this paper I have primarily referred to *The Natural Approach*[2], but the core of his theory is seen throughout his works.[3]

'The central hypothesis of the theory is that language acquisition occurs in only one way: by understanding messages.'[4] To support such a theory, Krashen argues for five further hypotheses:

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis

Krashen posits a distinction between language acquisition, understood as the ability to operate communicatively: to speak/read/write/hear so as to understand and be understood, and language learning, which is knowledge *about* the language, something grammar traditionally teaches. These two are distinct, so that learning does not readily convert to acquisition. A mastery of Latin grammar is not, by that criterion, a mastery of using Latin. The import of this distinction is that most classical language courses teach language learning, and contribute very little to language acquisition. Which is presumably why so few students emerge from classical language courses with a real facility to read fluently, let alone other skills.

Is there any point to promoting acquisition of a classical language? Some may well object that the aims of classical language education share little with modern languages. I simply ask, who will be the better reader of Virgil? The grammarian, or the student who can communicate in Latin and read it without pause?

The Natural Order Hypothesis

Krashen cites research that supports the idea that in *acquiring* a language, learners typically gain certain structures early and others late, in a predictable though not invariable order, which differs from language to language. This order is natural, and is invariable to some degree though not absolutely. Its import for classical languages is that a syllabus of incremental grammatical difficulty may in no way reflect the natural order of a language; moreover the natural order of acquisition for classical languages is, due to the paucity of speakers, difficult to deduce. Without further studies in this area, this hypothesis can afford little insight into the teaching of classical languages, though an awareness of it may hold us back from rigid progressions of concepts.

The Monitor Hypothesis

The Monitor hypothesis 'says that when we produce utterances in a second language, the utterance is 'initiated' by the acquired system, and our conscious learning only comes into play later.'[5] So the Monitor is our conscious grasp of a language, which is what learning produces, and it is this secondary knowledge that maintains guard over our production of a second language. The Monitor can only come into play when there is (a) time to edit (or correct) the utterance, (b) a consciousness of correctness, a mental focus on the form of language, and (c) a knowledge of the correct rules. For classical languages, many students remain in a Monitor-mode all the time. An alternative model of language acquisition does not devalue the Monitor, but seeks to use the Monitor only in applicable situations: writing and prepared speech.

This hypothesis is particularly relevant when considering the place of oral Latin work. Appropriately structured oral work bypasses the Monitor, whereas a high emphasis on grammatical correctness will make oral work stilted and halting.

The Input Hypothesis

This hypothesis is the most important of the five. 'We acquire (not learn) language by understanding input that is a little beyond our current level of (acquired) competence.'[6] So, if our current level of acquisition is represented by *i*, we only acquire further language by

> 'omnis lingua usu potius discitur quam praeceptis'
>
> – Amos Comenius

'in omnibus fere minus valent praecepta quam experimenta'

– Quintilianus

understanding input at level $i + 1$. The elements of input that are not already known to us become understandable, or comprehensible, by context or extra-linguistic information. If the amount of incomprehensible input is too high, then we cannot contextualise it effectively, and so more extra-linguistic help is needed. This is why graded readers tend to work. The input hypothesis also explains why the G-T approach *does* produce some language acquisition: students render a large amount of incomprehensible input understandable by extra-linguistic information, that is glosses and translation. Translation is but one, though relatively ineffectual, method of rendering input comprehensible.

In a communicative approach, the language of the learning environment is shaped to aim at that input level of $i + 1$, depending on where students are at, and that which is new is generally rendered comprehensible by context or by extra-linguistic information that does not revert to another language (e.g., pictures, actions, other sensible input).

The Affective-Filter Hypothesis

The final hypothesis 'states that attitudinal variables relating to success in second language acquisition generally relate directly to language acquisition but not necessarily to language learning.'[7] Aspects such as a positive attitude towards speakers of the language, a need to operate in the language, etc., increase success, whereas attitudinal negatives decrease it. Most language aptitude tests relate to learning, not acquisition. This suggests that the often obstinate belief that only intelligent students will succeed in Latin or Greek is more related to the standardised implementation of Grammar-Translation methodology employed to achieve language learning, than to any reality of students to acquire a communicative proficiency in those languages.

Mary Beard highlights this myth, 'Latin is an extremely self-selecting subject, chosen by some of our very brightest kids. No wonder they do extremely well – and, as I see when they apply to us, often get a string of other very high grades. The question is should Latin be the subject of choice for the less bright too?'[8] Perhaps the real question is, are there ways to make classical languages more accessible without 'dumbing it down'?

If Krashen is correct in these hypotheses, and I believe he is, it has two major implications. The first he calls the 'Great Paradox of Language Teaching': language is best taught when it is being used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning.'[9] Secondly, the standard pedagogical methods for teaching classical languages in our era are deeply flawed and incompetent for producing students proficient in reading extended texts, let alone other language skills.

Standard Grammar-Translation and Inductive-Reading approaches in classical languages

In this last section, I consider how two current, standard approaches to classical languages operate, and how they produce learning but not necessarily acquisition.

The model prevalent throughout much of the last century or two is the Grammar-Translation model. This generally involves a textbook that presents chapter by chapter a new grammatical feature, with paradigms to be rote-learned, as well as vocabulary items to be memorised, and then some exercises in translation (nowadays overwhelmingly in one direction). The assumption is that a mastery of grammar, a memory of paradigms, and a storehouse of vocabulary items equips the student to turn the text into passable English. This approach at its worst encourages students to treat the foreign language as merely a code: a set of signs corresponding to their first language to be decoded back into that first language, rather than a discrete language with its own entire system of signification.

Grammar-Translation leads to language learning. The successful student emerges with a veritable cornucopia of grammatical facts to be consciously applied. That it fails to lead to acquisition should be apparent if one considers the graduates of such courses, their future retention of the language, and how they fare compared to modern language programs.[10]

I have already noted in passing that the exercise of translation is one, though inefficient, method of rendering input comprehensible. It is this, coupled with the vast amounts of reading for translation expected of higher level students, that produces some acquisition. The challenge of advances in SLA is that perhaps there is a superior, and efficient, method for reaching the same, and higher, levels of language proficiency.

In recent years there has been a move to a model of Inductive-Reading approaches. These are a welcome step forward, but to some extent the basic methodology is the same. A student is presented with a text, which they are to read with minimal help, and in the text a new grammatical concept is introduced. The student is meant to observe from the reading how the new grammar works, and then the reading is followed by an explanation.

The similarity rests in the expectation that a student must still master that explicit grammar, as well as the growing vocabulary. The advantage of the Inductive-Reading approach is that it does involve vastly more reading which is presented in a very gradual manner, which certainly satisfied the Input hypothesis. That the order of grammar introduced follows traditional grammar texts closely does nothing to conform to the Natural Order hypothesis though.[11] Inductive-Reading is definitely an improvement on Grammar-Translation, but it should not be considered the end-point in applying SLA theory to classical language pedagogy.

Conclusion

If we take seriously the conclusions of Krashen and others in the field of SLA, it will require a major rethink of both the goals and methods of teaching classical languages. I certainly do not mean to suggest that we pit grammatical accuracy against communicative competency, and personally believe a program can be built to do both, but not in the same way. A sense of the historical should also cause questioning of our programs, Grammar-Translation and Inductive-Reading are latecomers in the world of language teaching. Some have already begun to rethink the way they approach teaching, while others are producing new, and renewed, resources for a more communicative approach. The challenge for teachers will be to confront the goals of their own programs as well as the systems in which they teach and the expectations of accreditation and assessment. As well, the deficiencies of some of our own education in the languages will become embarrassingly apparent. And yet, if we are willing, there is *no* intrinsic reason students could not be taught to learn Latin and Greek well enough to read, write, hear and speak as a proficient second language, with the focus remaining on reading and analysing the great texts of the past.

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Notes

[1] Such a belief still persists, and is presumably attributable to the fact that we find it most natural to teach as we have been taught. The common perception that only 'bright' students succeed at Classical languages may simply reflect the small percentage of learners that

readily take to grammar-translation.

[2] Krashen, S & Terrell, T. *The natural approach: language acquisition in the classroom* Oxford [Oxfordshire] ; New York : Pergamon Press ; San Francisco : Alemany Press, 1983.

[3] And on his website, http://sdkrashen.com/

[4] Krashen, 1983. p1.

[5] Krashen, 1983. p30

[6] Krashen, 1983. p32.

[7] Krashen, 1983. p37.

[8] Mary Beard, 'Is Latin too hard?' June 28th, 2006. http://timesonline.typepad.com/dons_life/2006/06/is_latin_too_ha.html

[9] Krashen, 1983. p55.

[10] Few school programs produce competent speakers, without external support or engagement with native speakers; University programs fare better.

[11] Given the lack of data on this, perhaps some experimentation is in order.