

Second Language Acquisition

IN THE 19TH and early 20th centuries, language teaching was based on the model of translating classical Greek and Latin texts, and was not really based on any theory of how language was learned. However, in the 20th century, linguists have begun to focus studies on how languages are learned and especially on the similarities and differences between how adults learn second languages and children learn their first one. In the first part of the 20th century, the main model was behaviorism, which viewed language use as a learned behavior. However, more recently, linguists have focused on the skills that users need to communicate using language, known as “communicative competence” (Lightbown & Spada 2006).

With the shift in scientific models has come a shift in language teaching methodology. The work of Steven Krashen has been very influential in providing a theoretical basis for many modern language teaching approaches, starting with his own *Natural Approach* to language teaching. Krashen’s language theory is known as the “Monitor Model”. According to Lightbown & Spada (2006) “[his] ideas were very influential during a period when second language teaching was in a transition from approaches that emphasized learning rules or memorizing dialogues to approaches that emphasized using language with a focus on meaning (p. 38)”.

On of the most influential aspects of Krashen’s theory has been his differentiation between *language learning* and *language acquisition*. In his view, *language learning* is the process of formally learning a language through studying grammar, word lists, translations, etc. *Language acquisition* is a largely unconscious process through which learners gain the ability to actually communicate in the second language, in much the same way a person gains his first language. Interestingly, some years ago, what Krashen calls “language learning” was regarded as the entire process of second language education. However, in his view, “learning” is nearly useless for actually gaining communicative ability in the second language. Instead, the ability to communicate is acquired by the student being exposed to a level of language just above what the student is already able to understand (Krashen calls this “L+1”, with L being the current ability level of the student in the second language) (Krashen, 1982).

Many modern language-teaching techniques take these ideas into account in that they see language learning as a process of unconscious acquisition rather than conscious memorization of rules and formulas. However,

Krashen’s model emphasizes receptive skills. On the other hand, contemporary communicative approaches emphasize the productive process by which two (or more) learners communicate in the target language thorough trial and error (see *Focus on Basics*, 2005) rather than the receptive process that Krashen emphasizes in his work.

Krashen’s biggest contribution to modern communicative language teaching is to recommend that learners be active participants in their own language learning, rather than passively memorizing rules and repeating dialogs. This idea dovetails well with recent thought about how adults can best be taught (as discussed earlier). Also, such models tend to focus on communicative competency, rather than formal learning of structures. In fact, many versions of Communicative Language teaching do not include explicit teaching of grammar at all. Instead, they set up activities where learners work together to create meaning in cooperative activities (see the section on **Communicative Language Teaching**, p. 10 for more on this). This “negotiation of meaning” is the way by which they gain ability and make progress in their second language.

FURTHER READING

Online

Walqui, A. (2000). *Contextual Factors in Second Language Acquisition*. ERIC Digest ED444381. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education. Available from: <http://www.ericdigests.org/2001-2/language.html>

Coté, R. A. (2004). *Adult Second Language Acquisition in Negative Environments*. Available from: [http://www.u.arizona.edu/~rcote/SPH541/Adult Second Language Acquisition in Negative Environments.pdf](http://www.u.arizona.edu/~rcote/SPH541/Adult%20Second%20Language%20Acquisition%20in%20Negative%20Environments.pdf)

Focus on Basics, Volume 8, Issue A, November 2005: ESOL Research. Available from: <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=986>

Print

Krashen, S. (1982). *Principals and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lightbown, P. M. & Spada, N. (2006). *How Languages Are Learned*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press