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Abstract. Lomb Kato and Steven Kaufman have each acquired at least 15 languages as adults, many without living the country where the language is spoken. Their observations about language acquisition are in close agreement with the claims of current second language acquisition theory.

Keywords: *polyglot, comprehension, grammar, correction, perfection*

Introduction

In this paper, I present the insights of two amazing polyglots, second language acquirers who have had a tremendous amount of experience acquiring different languages in different situations. My source of information are their writings and my conversations with them.

Their books were written before they were aware of current research and theory in second language acquisition: They came to their understandings from their own experiences. Here are my conclusions:

1. The polyglots understand that the driving force behind language acquisition is comprehensible input, and they recognize the limited role of conscious knowledge of grammar and error correction.
2. They reject the popular idea that all you need is to “go the country” (“immersion”).
3. They seek high interest “compelling” input.
4. They warn us about striving for perfectionism, both in terms of producing and understanding language.
5. They urge us to “trust the process.”

The polyglots

Lomb Kato (1909-2003) did not grow up multilingual, and lived in Budapest her entire life. She acquired, however, 17 languages and was a professional interpreter and translator. She got interested in languages after receiving her PhD in Chemistry, first studying French and then studying and teaching English. She was 86 when I met her in Budapest in 1995, and she had made considerable progress on language number 18, Hebrew. (Note: In English, Lomb Kato is Kato Lomb. Hence, I have listed her book as Lomb (2016). It was originally written in 1983 in Hungarian, and translated by Adam Szegi, and edited by Scott Alkire.)

Steven Kaufman, although a native of Montreal, also grew up in a monolingual environment, his only exposure to French being traditional instruction in school. Kaufman has acquired 15 languages, the last eight between ages 61 and 71.

The Comprehension Hypothesis

The Comprehension Hypothesis claims that we acquire language and develop literacy in only one way: when we understand aural and written language. It claims that our competence in grammar, our knowledge of vocabulary and our ability to produce language fluently and easily are a result of getting “comprehensible input” (Krashen,

2003).

This is quite different from traditional methodology, which I refer to as “skill-building.” The Skill-Building Hypothesis reverses the causality: It claims that first we have to consciously learn grammar rules and vocabulary items, and practice using them in spoken and written production, doing it repeatedly until production becomes “automatic.” We can “fine-tune” our conscious knowledge of grammar by getting our errors corrected when we produce language. Skill-Building also maintains that our spoken fluency is the result of practicing speaking.

The Comprehension Hypothesis is, of course, a hypothesis, which means it is subject to falsification. Thus far, however, the research is quite consistent with the predictions it makes: In method comparison studies, students taught with methods consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis generally do better, and never do worse, than students taught with traditional methods (Krashen, 2003). For a list of studies, see Krashen (2014a). A powerful form of comprehensible input, self-selected reading, has consistently emerged as a strong predictor of scores on standardized tests in a variety of situations (Krashen, 2012). The Comprehension Hypothesis also helps explain success in second language acquisition in a wide variety of case histories (Krashen, 2014b; Mason and Krashen, 2017).

The role of grammar in the two rival hypotheses.

For the Skill-Building Hypothesis, grammar is central: The route to competence requires that we first learn rules consciously, and then “practice” them in output.

In contrast, a hypothesis related to the Comprehension Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, claims that conscious knowledge of rules has a limited impact on language production: We apply our learned grammar rules to our output only when three very severe conditions are met: (1) when we know the rule, (2) when we have time, and (3) when we are thinking about correctness, or focusing on form. Condition (1) is impossible to meet for all rules of language –many rules are extremely complex and linguists admit that they have not described all the rules of any language. Conditions (2) and (3) are also a challenge: in oral language production we rarely have enough time to retrieve complex rules and apply them, and when conversations get interesting we generally think about the meaning of what we are saying and what the other person is saying, rather than the form. These conditions are fully met only when we take a grammar test (Krashen, 1982, chapter four) or when we edit our writing, watching out for grammatical rules that even well-read writers have not acquired but that must be obeyed, eg the its/it’s distinction.

Comprehension, Not Skill-Building

It is clear that both polyglots attributed their accomplishments to the Comprehensible Input, not grammar study.

Here is Kaufman’s blunt advice: "Do not spend your time in a vain attempt to master the language from grammar rules and word lists. You will not enjoy this tedious form of study, and it will not work." (Kaufman, 2003; p. 90).

Lomb Kato included grammar study as part of her personal program in working on new languages, but felt that grammar is not the most important aspect of developing competence in languages; grammar study should be optional for adults, and should

consist only of the most straight-forward rules. Requiring children to study grammar was, in her opinion, “absurd” (Krashen and Kiss, 1996).

Similarly, Lomb Kato tell us, "What lets you avoid mistakes is not memorized laws of grammar but the right form seen, heard, and said (sic) to such an extent that it has become second nature" (Lomb, 2016, p. 92). She notes that even a profound knowledge of grammar does not mean competence in the language: "Many excellent philologists who with impressive confidence in the most abstract realms of a foreign language need an interpreter to buy a streetcar ticket or order lunch" (Lomb, 2016, p. 91). Stated in terms of current theory, conscious learning is not of much use in real language use, but what we have acquired through comprehensible input is.

Steven Kaufman relates what happens when he consults grammar books: “Sometimes the explanations helped and at other times they did not ... I would usually remember grammar rules or explanations (if I understood them) only for a short period of time and then forget them. In the end it was only through enough exposure to the language that my grammar improved" (Kaufman, p. 100).

Accepting the new grammar

Both polyglots talk about the importance of being open to the acquisition of new forms. Kaufman says that instead of grammar study, “I just accepted the various structural patterns of sentences in Chinese as normal. I knew that with enough exposure they would start to seem natural to me. I found it easier to learn the structure of a new language from frequent exposure to phrase patterns rather than trying to understand abstract grammatical explanations." (p. 42). And: "Sentence structures that were strange and difficult at first eventually felt natural if I encountered them often enough in my reading and listening." (p.100). When a structure “feels natural,” this can be interpreted as a sign of subconscious language acquisition.

Similarly, Lomb Kato tells us: "Perusing books frequently and listening to the radio diligently allow us to encounter the right forms again and again. If our interest gets our heart and mind to accept these patterns, we can recall them quickly when we need them." (p. 93).

Correction

According to current theory, correction is aimed at conscious learning: the purpose of correction is to help the learner arrive at the correct version of a consciously learned rule. Language learners are rarely grateful for these corrections; even though they may ask to be corrected, they often don't react well when it happens (Krashen, 1994) and there is good evidence that correction doesn't work very well (Truscott, 1999; 2016).

Lomb Kato's reaction to correction mirrors the research just cited: On one hand, she states that “Uncorrected mistakes are very perilous! If one keeps repeating wrong formulas, they take root in the mind and one will be inclined to accept them as authentic” (Alkire, p. 21). But she also experienced the negative impact of correction, even saying that correction can make you “sick to your stomach.” She recalled one situation, when, as an interpreter translating into English, she said “unorganic” instead of “inorganic,” clearly a slip (Dr. Lomb had a Ph.D. in Chemistry). Even though the translation was successful, she was haughtily corrected by another interpreter. She reports that she was lost for the rest of the day (Krashen and Kiss, 1996).

Immersion

Common advice to those wanting to acquire other language is to “go to the country.” Lomb Kato and Steven Kaufman both recognize the limitations of “immersion.” Immersion does not always mean comprehensible input.

Lomb Kato: "When you are abroad – especially as a tourist – it is rather difficult to make the acquaintance of someone patient, intelligent, and available enough to help you practice your foreign language skills. With the energy it requires, one can normally achieve the same results while staying at home" (p. 111).

She also notes, in agreement with the Comprehension Hypothesis, that residence in the country works best for those at the intermediate level, when acquirers have enough competence to understand at least some of what they hear: “Those who know nothing at the outset will probably return with virgin minds. For those at a very advanced level, improvement will be difficult to detect. The best results will show ... at the intermediate level” (p. 22).

There are strategies for getting comprehensible input from an uncooperative environment. Lomb Kato recommends taking guided tours, and going to the movies: “Studying a language provides an excellent excuse for going to the movies” (Alkire, p. 22). And here is one more:

Language parents: A source of comprehensible input

Steven Kaufman also recognizes the limits of immersion. He suggests finding a friend: "My closest colleague at the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo was the Japanese Commercial Officer, Mr. ‘Nick’ Yazaki. He was a major help ... He (was) inclined to express himself in a most careful, painstaking and long-winded way ... Finding a native speaker who is patient and supportive can be invaluable in learning a new language" (p. 55).

Lonsdale (2006) makes a similar suggestion, and coined the term “language parent.” A language parent is somebody who will engage you in conversation in the language you are acquiring but who will not try to be your teacher, will try to understand what you say “even though you are miles away from what a native speaker would usually be able to understand” (p. 178), is interested in you as a person, and “more often than not, the person will be quite talkative” (p. 179). In other words, a language parent is someone who will give you interesting comprehensible input.

My German language “parent” in Vienna in 1961-1962 was my landlady, the wonderful Frau Novak. She told the same stories again and again, but they were great stories and I understood more each time I heard them, a familiar occurrence with narrow listening (Rodrigo and Krashen, 1996; Dupuy, 1999).

A reasonable conjecture is that one person, one solid language parent, can supply the bridge that helps low level acquirers acquire enough competence to be able to interact with many native speakers.

The Importance of Compelling Comprehensible Input

If language acquisition requires that we understand input, we must pay attention to it. There is, of course, a better chance of this happening if the input is interesting, and an even better chance of this happening if the input is extremely interesting, so interesting that we even “forget” that it is in another language. When we get “compelling”

comprehensible input, our focus is entirely on the message. We are in a state of "flow" in which our sense of time and even our sense of self is diminished (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Krashen, 2011; Lao and Krashen, 2014). A reasonable hypothesis is that compelling input may be optimal for language acquisition.

Each of the two polyglots understood the importance of compelling input. While taking Mandarin classes Steven Kaufman noted that "the best sessions were those when the teacher would just talk about some interesting subjects. I did most of my learning at these more informal conversational sessions ..." (p. 38). I had a similar experience in Hebrew classes in Israel: Our teacher dedicated that last 30 minutes of each three-hour session to telling amazingly interesting versions of bible stories, with no obvious pedagogical goal. I suspect these sessions were the most valuable for acquiring Hebrew.

Lomb Kate's major source of compelling input was reading fiction; she did nearly all of her pleasure reading in other languages. The following quotes show that she understood the importance of being in "flow": "A character's fate becomes the reader's fate ... Genuine readers sail with Robinson Crusoe, throw themselves under the train with Anna Karenina, and die of tuberculosis with the Lady of the Camellias. Afterward, luckily, they come back to life." (p. 21).

Perfectionism

Both Lomb Kato and Steven Kaufman warn us against perfectionism. In terms of current theory, perfection in language production means over-use of the conscious monitor, making sure everything one is about to say is fully correct according to the rules we have learned (Krashen, 1981).

Lomb Kato warns us that "if you feel that you must speak like a native... you will be inhibited" (p. 28), and has a refreshing point of view about imperfect language: ".... language is the only thing worth knowing even poorly Propagation of half-truths is not an advancement of science but a hindrance. For the language learner, however, it would be a pity to fall silent because he or she doesn't know with certainty whether a form will hit home or not" (p.111).

Steven Kaufman has wonderful advice along with a profound observation – other people are not worried about your mistakes! "You will often feel that you are struggling, when in fact you are communicating quite successfully.... Focus on the meaning you are trying to communicate, not on how well you are doing. Do not think that your grammar and pronunciation are being judged ... your listeners want to understand you." (pp. 128-9). And: "Try to force yourself from the desire to achieve perfection, which is vanity and will hinder your progress. Instead, seek to communicate naturally and enjoy yourself. Your improvement will be constant although uneven." (p. 89).

Current theory predicts that we will make greater progress in language acquisition if we follow this advice. We will interact more and thereby get more comprehensible input.

Perfectionism in reading is the tendency to look up every unknown word. Kaufman points out the futility of looking up words: "You can ... expect to forget whatever you look up in a dictionary pretty quickly." (p. 133). In fact, Kaufman has stated that he generally forgets the meaning of the word he has looked up by the time puts down the dictionary and returns to the text: consciously learned knowledge does not stick.

Lomb Kato agrees and suggests we keep reading reasonably comprehensible texts: "Do not automatically reach for the dictionary if you encounter a word or two you don't

recognize. If the expression is important, it will reappear and explain itself; if it is not so important, it is no big loss to gloss over it." (131-2).

These observations are consistent with what research tells us: Acquisition is gradual. Swanborn and de Glopper (1999) provide evidence that each time we encounter a new word in a comprehensible context, we acquire a part of the meaning: This means that many words are not learned all at once when they are seen in context. Rather, word knowledge is acquired in "small increments," confirming a conjecture made by Twadell (1973): "we may 'know' a very large number of words with various degrees of vagueness – words which are in a twilight zone between the darkness of entire unfamiliarity and the brightness of complete familiarity" (Twadell 1973, p. 73).

This suggests that stopping to look up every word will result in less chance for vocabulary acquisition because it means less reading. If we can skip some words and are still confident we have understood the text, we will read more, encounter more words in a comprehensible context and gradually acquire their meaning.

Of course, sometimes we must check on the meaning of a word because it seems to be important and context does not help. When this happens too frequently, we need to find another text.

Trust the process

When we are frustrated with what we think is the slow emergence of fluency, Kaufman urges us to keep listening and reading and trust the process: "The successful foreign language speakers take for granted that they will have to communicate in another language, and do not feel that it is an unusual thing. It is natural to them" (p. 96). "Accept the fact that you were born with the ability to learn to speak a new language..." (p. 95).

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