
SPRACHEN LEHREN – SPRACHEN LERNEN



Scaffolded Language Emergence in the Classroom

From Theory to Practice

Donald Kiraly & Sarah Signer

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Don Kiraly

DON KIRALY

SECTION I: THE GENESIS AND THEORETICAL
UNDERPINNINGS OF THE SLE APPROACH

Introducing *Scaffolded Language Emergence* – An approach but not a method

The history of language teaching is a history dominated by one particular approach that dates back at least hundreds of years if not millennia and that has been used virtually the world over to impart knowledge of learners' non-native languages. Back in 1987, William E. Rutherford, an eminent scholar in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, wrote:

[...] a glimpse at the methodological history of language teaching is very instructive, for it reveals that for centuries on end [...] there was essentially one way to teach languages – one that extends into the present – and that is what is known as grammar-translation. (Rutherford 1987: 209)

And 20 years later, Dalke et al. (2007) formulated their view on the near-monolithic state of language teaching as follows:

Despite all the work done in progressive education, many teachers continue to imagine, and are often encouraged to believe, that the most effective and efficient method involves a structured environment, in which the instructor imparts carefully packaged information to students, to digest and incorporate into their existing knowledge base. (Dalke et al. 2007: 111)

And yet, alternative approaches to the 'packaged information' paradigm in foreign language teaching have been legion. Most of them have been met with some, and in a few cases – like Steven Krashen's *Natural Approach* – considerable initial acceptance and success. But virtually all of them have ultimately fallen by the wayside, leaving in place what I believe is still the highly transmissionist practice of attempting to transfer bits and pieces of knowledge about a language to would-be learners (despite the lip service paid in recent decades to 'communication' in the foreign language classroom). Some of the alternative approaches of recent decades appear to be on rather dubious theoretical footing which may have precipitated their demise: an enormous amount

of criticism has been aimed at the *Natural Approach*, for instance, due to the alleged lack of evidence for and the unfalsifiability of Krashen's renowned five hypotheses. (see, for example: Taylor: 2004, Gregg: 1984, Liu: 2015, McGlaughlin: 1978).¹

This little book aims to share with readers interested in promising alternatives to conventional foreign language teaching some of the steps along a journey. This is a journey that I have undertaken in collaboration with many colleagues and students towards developing an approach that I believe could be feasible for certain kinds of learners, but that has so far not been subjected to rigorous empirical research. This book could be a first step towards undertaking such research. Let it be noted at the outset: *Scaffolded Language Emergence* (SLE) is to be understood as an approach ([which I define, borrowing loosely from Richards and Rogers (1986)] as a tapestry of interwoven assumptions and learning design features deduced from those assumptions), rather than a method (a detailed, session-by-session roadmap for instruction – typically based on an approach). I have included no ready-made lesson plans, cookie-cutter exercises, or lists of vocabulary or grammatical structures that are to be taught or learned because to do so would have meant contradicting the very essence of this approach. (The book does, however, contain a selection of scenes and techniques from various courses created and run on the basis of the principles presented in this volume).

The book is divided into two main sections:

1. A review of the key experiences and epiphanies that led to the development of this approach. This section deals with both the genesis and the theoretical framework of the SLE approach and how communicative competence can be understood and dealt with as an emergent (non-linear, dynamic and autopoietic) system; and
2. From theory to practice: examples of the principles at work, beneficial outcomes and caveats for would-be SLE facilitators.

.....

1 In order to skirt criticisms of non-falsifiability, I have intentionally avoided proposing any hypotheses like those upon which Steven Krashen's *Natural Approach* (Krashen 1982, Krashen & Terrell 1983) was based regarding the nature of language learning processes. Instead, I have drawn on what I see as a set of abductive assumptions that reflect my pragmatistic, social constructivist and post-positivist epistemology. It has not been my objective to discover how language acquisition actually occurs in the real world, but instead to propose a plausible set of assumptions and a course of action for initiating and stimulating L_n communicative competence in adults.

Section I: The initial section outlines and elucidates the theoretical foundations and practical genesis of the SLE approach. The chapters in this section will 1) discuss my own experience with various language teaching methods dating back as far as 1977, including: [*Structuro-global Audio-Visual (SGAV)*] methodology developed in France in the 1960s and 1970s, Krashen and Terrell's *Natural Approach* and *Total Physical Response*, 2) the implications of a social constructivist epistemology for L2 development; and 3) language learning seen as an *emergent* process: the especial relevance of complexity thinking and language ecology in foreign language education, which has been a major focus of the ground-breaking research conducted by a number of language education scholars including: Leo Van Lier (1996, 2000, 2005), Diane Larsen-Freeman (1997, 2007, 2011), and Nick Ellis (1998).

Section II: The second section of this volume was written by my colleague Sarah Signer, a trained translator who is also a regular teaching staff member at the FTSK of the University of Mainz. Sarah has a CELTA qualification in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. She worked for a year full-time as a TEFL teacher in China and has spent five additional years teaching English part-time at various institutions in Germany. However, she has never actually taught or participated in an SLE course. Hence, she epitomises an important target group I wish to address with this book: trained and experienced teachers who are interested in looking beyond conventional instructional approaches to language teaching. In the second section of the book, Sarah discusses a cornucopia of practical examples illustrating the special nature of SLE courses – all offered at the FTSK over the last ten years. These examples are all drawn from BA and MA theses written by students under my supervision at the FTSK in recent years.

Section III: This brief concluding section, written by Don Kiraly, summarises the key features of SLE courses in the form of some basic initial guidelines to help would-be SLE facilitators create and run their own foreign language courses.

Chapter 1: SLE – A post-method approach for initiating foreign language emergence

This volume lays out the foundation of my approach as an invitation to current and prospective language teachers to use in the creation of their own courses and ‘facilitated learning’ materials and particularly activities. The claim was made in the field of foreign language teaching some time ago that we are now in the “post-method” stage of its evolution (Karavamakulu: 2003), and I do not intend to contradict that characterisation here. Dozens of SLE courses (most of them short and intensive) in many languages have been taught at my home institution, the University of Mainz, Germany, over the past ten years – all of them crafted largely from scratch by small teams of relatively untrained language teachers on the basis of the SLE approach. In other words, all of our teacher-facilitators have simultaneously been the designers of the courses they have gone on to offer.

Provided with an introduction to the theoretical foundation of assumptions and design principles, as well as extensive scaffolding on my part during the planning stage, these novice teachers in essence have all created their own language courses. As a result each course has been unique, but also dependent on the course design and facilitating capabilities of each team of teacher facilitators (and also adapted to the myriad features of each group of learners). The spirit and practice of the SLE-based classes we have run over the years at the FTSK, in my view, are completely in tune with those of the Dogme post-method approach developed by Luke Meddings and Scott Thornbury (2003, 2009) – which I only discovered late in the process of writing this volume on SLE. In explaining what makes the Dogme mindset (which they prefer to call it instead of a method or approach) different from that underlying conventional instruction, Meddings and Thornbury state:

A dogme lesson can feel like a group of people freed from their expectations of the traditional teacher-student, them-and-us, relationship: a group of people enjoying the freedom of using language to talk about immediate, real concerns; a group of people reassured by the teacher’s interest in them, in their experience, and – critically – in **their** language use and needs. (Authors’ emphasis) (2003: 1)