

Book Review

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Kiraly, D. & Signer, S. (2017). *Scaffolded Language Emergence in the Classroom. From Theory to Practice*. Berlin: Frank & Timme. ISBN 978-3-7329-0259-0.

1 Introduction

Second language learners throughout the years are generally engaged in environments that make them fill a certain societal role: that is, they will be students, sitting down in chairs among other students, with all their eyes focused on the instructor in the front of the classroom. The students are there for a set amount of time before the class is dismissed by the authority of the classroom, the teacher, who students rely on for their own education and learning pace. The role of teacher and student has usually been instilled into a learner's mind from an early age, attending institutions that sometimes resemble factories with the rows of students waiting for the bell to ring at the end of the day of hard work. In many cases, language institutions are built and formed with this format as a blueprint, an unconscious cultural assumption of what a learning environment is supposed to be like. However, second language researchers have aimed to develop alternative approaches to these environments and the type of instruction they usually entail, like some notorious "grammar-translation" exercises. Some of these approaches were picked up by second language instructors with positive outcomes, but the pedagogical landscape tends to fall back after a while to the traditional instructor-centered paradigm.

Donald Kiraly and Sarah Signer aim to shift this focus in second language classrooms back to the students who are just beginning their studies in another language. The *Scaffolded Language Emergence* (SLE) approach addresses several popular second language teaching theories throughout the decades to come up with a new approach that reevaluates how the classroom, students, and teachers are perceived, along with how language is acquired.

2 About Scaffolded Language Emergence

The authors of the book situate the SLE approach close to that of the *Dogme mindset*, that is, one where traditional expectations of student and teacher are discarded in favor of a more authentic experience (Medding & Thornbury, 2009). SLE finds its niche by taking this mindset and building a theory aimed at beginner language learners. This is supported by Kiraly rooting SLE into three domains: one which

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involves “naturalistic, immersion-type language learning,” one with social-constructivist educational thought associated with thinkers such as Lev Vygotsky and John Dewey, and one in a body of language learning and acquisition, with special emphasis on social and cognitive language learning processes (pp. 18–19).

The approach itself is that learner language is emergent; that is, instead of teachers transferring pre-packed packets of information to a student, students are engaged with authentic and immersive language in different contexts. SLE is specifically designed for learners in the elementary stage of their language learning, and is meant to provide scaffolding for these learners’ language to emerge.

3 On Don Kiraly, Sarah Signer, and the book’s contents

The book is composed of two parts: the first part, written by Kiraly, describes SLE with grounded theory in second-language acquisition (SLA) along with his own personal teaching experiences in development of the approach. The second part, written by Signer, is a cohesive analysis on thesis papers written by instructors at the university that looked at how SLE was used in their own classrooms. These theses include the facilitators’ own experiences along with insightful collected feedback material from students engaged in SLE environments.

Kiraly’s section, titled “The Genesis and Theoretical Underpinnings of the SLE Approach,” is divided into six chapters that both analyze foreign language teaching methods throughout the years and the theories that had a major influence on these methods.

Throughout the section, Kiraly shares parts of his past language teaching and learning experiences to the reader along with how they relate to the SLE approach. Although the section presents these pieces in relation to the subject of discussion at the time, these experiences chronologically begin with his first year of instruction as a lecturer at the *Institut National des Sciences Appliquées* in 1977. During this year, Kiraly was introduced to the *Sturcuro-Global Audio-Visual* method of language instruction, which he examines in terms of approach in other parts of the section, and a few months later, the *All’s Well* method. These two methods served as the prime foundation during the formulation of the SLE approach, shifting the pedagogical philosophy of language from isolated cognitive processes to that of embodiment of cognition in which these processes are theorized to work in tandem with the physical and emotional collection of an individual. Constructing an approach such as SLE requires a personal touch with original experiences to provide the reader a level of comprehension that is greater than the sum of its parts. Kiraly’s description for the *SGAV* and *All’s Well* approaches (mostly found in Chapter 3) – and how they branched off into SLE’s development – accomplish this with refined writing dexterity.

Other chapters in this section include an introduction to SLE in Chapter 1, and an outline of initial steps taken towards SLE in Chapter 2. Kiraly presents an analysis on *The Natural Approach* with heavy focus on Steven Krashen and Tracy Terrell’s Comprehensible Input in relation to Vygotskyian social constructivism in Chapter 4. The next chapter identifies the key concepts of disposition, affordances, and signifiers with a model of emergent language learning. Chapter 6 brings each of the previous chapters together with pedagogical beacons. This chapter is especially insightful as it is broken down into seven cornerstones of the SLE mindset.

Sarah Signer is unique as the author of the second section of the book, as although she has L2 English teaching experience, she has neither taught nor

participated with an SLE course as of the book's composition. Kiraly specifically asked Signer to author the second section as she is part of the demographic the book is for, quoted in the introduction as "trained and experienced teachers who are interested in looking beyond conventional instructional approaches to languages teaching" (p. 13). This gives Signer the opportunity to analyze the SLE approach from a viewpoint of a likely reader. Signer's section looks at BA and MA theses of students writing about the SLE approach under Kiraly's supervision. As Signer is a trained translator and colleague of Kiraly's at the *Fachbereich Translation, Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft* (FTSK) of the University of Mainz in Germany, she presents a concise analysis of exemplary practices in the SLE approach in an academic yet friendly manner in her five chapters.

4 Evaluation

One of the many strengths of the book comes in how the SLE approach is presented to the readers. The authors treat SLE more of an "approach" than a theory, and although some example material in Signer's section is naturally presented as part of her analysis of the facilitator's theses, there are no laid-out, pre-planned lessons or unit plans that are found with traditional books in education. By treating SLE as an approach in the book, the authors encourage the reader to adapt the mindset that underpins SLE to her or his own already established philosophy of education. This can help inform classroom activities that the reader already has experienced with knowing what works for them, and how to modify their material to go beyond the traditional classroom format. This mindset, however, is not limited to just how classroom activities can be more effective. The shift involves a reimagination of how the roles of everyone involved in the classroom are seen. For example, in the beginning of the book, what is traditionally understood as "a teacher" or "an instructor" has been more aptly named "facilitator," as these individuals (perhaps the reader) are more like people who help a second language emerge from the learners. Although these minor reexaminations of teaching concepts are not anything groundbreaking in education or second-language learning, the way Kiraly and Signer present the approach was especially welcoming when working with theories in SLA.

Kiraly's decision to treat SLE in this manner helps not only highlight his perspicacious section to be understood easily by the reader, but Signer's section with original content. Signer builds upon the first section, chapter-by-chapter, starting on affordances, signifiers, and embodiment in the SLE classroom where the first section leaves off. The original quotations from both students and their facilitators help illuminate the concepts introduced in the first section, and thus a reader could not ask for a better compliment to the first half of the book.

The book is not without weaknesses that are mostly attributed to its format. Subjectively, the first section is composed of chapters that, although have a unifying theme with a style that incorporates Kiraly's previous experiences into the development of the approach, do not necessarily build on one another. This becomes especially apparent after the initial two chapters that introduce the reader to the concept. Increasingly after the end of each chapter, the reader could become more frustrated with why and how the chapters relate to one another, a problem that reaches its zenith in the fifth chapter's discussion on dispositions, affordances, and signifiers, where a model of emergent language learning is given on page 58. This was not connected particularly well with previous chapters,

except for a few concepts discussed such as grammaticalization and Krashen's innatist view of grammar on page 53. For the first half of the book, the reader discovers how previous teaching praxes, theories, methods, and approaches worked, their shortcomings, and how they helped develop SLE. In Chapter 5, we are presented with a few other theoretical concepts by the likes of Diane Larson-Freeman, Leo Van Lier, and psychologist James Gibson, but it is not until the final chapter in this section that everything comes together. This perhaps leads to the reader facing questions that are not addressed until later. The problem arises as the reader is not yet familiar with Signer's section that will answer some of the questions that might arise for a reader until later in the book. This is particularly true for questions on how an SLE approach would look like from the perspective of what Kiraly is analyzing in one of his chapters.

One example thematic question that I developed early on was inspired by the impression that courses offered at the FTSK seemed to be one type of language classroom, where most students share a similar L1 and cultural background. What about diverse classrooms with multiple L1s and cultural expectations of how a class should be held? How would students who have conditioned beliefs of what a classroom should be like from their past experiences in, say, mainland China, handle the environment offered by the SLE approach compared to a student in Germany? What would students' affective factors look like when they are working together as part of the scaffolding for emergent language, if the activities they perform are not in line with their expectations? These questions were eventually answered in the second section of the book with extracted student quotations from the theses, but developing an approach through writing has limitations without examples on-hand during such development rather than in a separate section that comes later. Thus, although there is some overlap in theme and philosophy between the chapters, the reader is left uncertain of what the SLE approach would generally address the shortcomings of previous approaches or methodologies until later in the book due to its bisectional format.

5 Conclusion

Scaffolded Language Emergency in the Classroom: From Theory to Practice is a book written for, as the authors put it, experienced second language teachers that wish to look beyond the traditional classroom. This book offers such second language instructors with theoretical underpinnings of SLE, along with how it works in practice from theses of facilitators who have used this (and quotations from their own students). This book provides, however, the tools to transition from second language teacher to an SLE facilitator to both experienced and inexperienced teachers alike – though complementary material may be needed for newer teachers.

References

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