Response to The Availability of Conscious Knowledge: A Comment on Lindseth (2016)

Martina Lindseth
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Abstract: My study (Lindseth, The Effects of Form-Focused Instruction on the Acquisition of Subject-Verb Inversion in German) that was published in the Volume 49, No. 1 issue of Foreign Language Annals suggested that form-focused instruction that targets a specific structure may help learners progress faster toward accurate use of this structure in spontaneous speech, i.e., a situation that does not appear to allow monitoring or consciously applying rules. In his letter to the editor in this issue, Dr. Krashen questioned whether participants were, indeed, using language in a spontaneous way. He framed his concerns in terms of his 1982 hypothesis, which states that second language performers can access and apply conscious knowledge when all three of the following conditions are met: (1) speakers consciously know the rule, (2) they are thinking about correctness, and (3) they have time to apply the rule. I do not agree that all three conditions were met in my study.

Key words: German, all languages, focus on form, foreign/second language learning/acquisition, oral proficiency

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In this letter, I would like to address the way in which each of those conditions was or was not met in my study. The first condition—that participants had
conscious knowledge of the rule—was met, as shown by their control of the structure in writing at the onset of the experiment. In addition, the initial stages of the intervention were designed to heighten students’ awareness of the structure and gradually lead them to more spontaneously produce accurate language, thus providing learners opportunities to think about correctness (the second condition). However, although learners had participated in scaffolded activities where time was allowed for conscious monitoring, the conditions under which data were gathered at the end of the experiment did not allow sufficient time for participants to explicitly think of correctness and consciously apply the rule (the third condition).

Although Dr. Krashen’s claims that the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is “clearly a test” and “not genuine conversation” and as such “obviously encourages a focus on form,” the OPI testing instrument uses a conversational format to elicit spontaneous speech across a wide variety of topics, independent of instructional settings. Because test takers cannot predict the questions nor prepare answers for the test, it is unlikely that they would be able to “intensively focus” on a particular construction while still producing a 20-minute sample of unrehearsed speech. A number of factors further substantiate the claim that learners did not engage in conscious monitoring: (1) the interview was not conducted by the researcher; (2) the interview was framed as a routine, summative postprogram assessment; (3) there were no explicit reminders to focus on any aspect of language, including accuracy of a particular structure; and (4) learners’ speech was not characterized by self-corrections, hesitations, avoidance, or overuse of the construction. In sum, contrary to Dr. Krashen’s claim, I would argue that the framing and the format of the post-assessment interview itself, as well as the learners’ use of language, confirm the spontaneity of their speech rather than their focus on “only a few rules.”

While I appreciate this opportunity to extend the conversation with Dr. Krashen and the readers of this journal, I would also like to point out that my primary interest, similar to that of most language instructors, is to facilitate a learner’s ability to use language fluently, confidently, and with increasing control over problematic constructions in spontaneous, meaningful communication. The results of this study show a much higher rate of success in controlling one such structure in extended, spontaneous speech as a result of a short, focused intervention, suggesting the benefits of form-focused instruction, at least for some constructions. Additional research to test the generalizability of this approach and to explore theoretical questions concerning explicit and implicit knowledge is needed.

Submitted May 11, 2016
Accepted May 11, 2016