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Teaching Forum

TEACHING SPEAKING IN THE CELTIC LANGUAGES

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"Sheltered Initiation Language Learning" [SILL] is an innovative initial method for teaching foreign languages, aimed at creating confident and creative speaking abilities. "Its startling methodological assumptions, instructional procedures, and degree of success present a bold challenge to prevalent language acquisition theory." (Marianne Celce-Murcia, ed., 1991, *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, second edition, Rowley, Mass.: Newbury).

SILL is based in acquisition theory, but its approach, relying on "output" (production) over "input" (comprehension), is opposite to mainstream methods (see "Sheltered-Initiation Language Learning," in *Applied Language Learning*, vol. 4, #1-2, 1993). Instead of "immersing" students in a mass of linguistic data (which they may understand communicatively but possibly not grammatically), SILL presents an orderly sequencing of words and sentence-patterns (and, later, of grammatical detail as well). Learning five or so words at a time in a tightly incremented sequence of short lessons, each focusing on a sentence pattern (starting from "X, please," and moving on, lesson by lesson, to descriptive and narrative sentences), students gradually learn to express given meanings, without wading through masses of input.

Immersion may work well for languages like Spanish (at least when students are able to study for the many hours per week that it requires), but it is not widely practical for Less Commonly Taught Languages. While "immersion weekends" may be wonderful motivators, they are not sufficient to produce true speaking abilities. But speaking is the very definition of "knowing a language" in the mind of

most students, just as confident, creative speaking ability is the sine-qua-non of any language "revival," abroad as in the home country.

SILL sequences grammar innovatively, deferring complications until they are actually needed. By starting with masculines only to encourage initial fluency, it delays (for a few lessons) the complex explanation of eclipsis that begins most Irish textbooks. Also delayed: the copula (*is*), and conjugation of Irish (in favor of the periphrastic present with *ag*). Teachers may fear that some students will never learn the delayed difficulties. However, I have found (*op.cit.*), in some specific instances already studied, that SILL allows faster, more effective introduction of grammatical categories than other curricula.

For Irish and Welsh, SILL has been implemented in "Samples" of 1-3 hours (containing some "optional" lessons). They can be taught before, or along with, regular curriculum. They are supplied with instructions about the four simple "study-steps" that teachers need to follow. (For each of the lessons mentioned above, students need to: read aloud the "associations" provided for learning words (step 0); learn the words thoroughly and fluently (step 1); practice substituting different words in the sentence-pattern (step 2); and practice "Talkathon," saying sentences in different patterns, and thus practicing fluency (step 3).)

Teachers of Irish and Welsh are invited to participate (by writing to me at the address below) in an experiment to evaluate SILL formally, by teaching the "Sample" and filling out short evaluations.

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Materials Received

Comhar na Múinteoirí Gaeilge. (1994): *Who Said That?*
Dublin: CMG.

Teach yourself Irish video (2 hrs. US\$25, p+p inc.). NTSC (North American) version. Suitable for adult classes or home study (introduction). Available from Comhar na Múinteoirí Gaeilge, 7 Merrion Square, Dublin 2, Ireland.

Singleton, D. & Lengyel, Z., eds. (1995). *The Age Factor in Second Language Acquisition*. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.

Contents include **Introduction: A Critical Look at the Critical Period Hypothesis in Second Language Acquisition Research** by David Singleton, **Can Late Learners Attain a Native Accent in a Foreign Language? A Test of the Critical Period Hypothesis** by Theo Bongaerts, Brigitte Planken, and Erik Schils, **Multicompetence and Effects of Age** by Vivian Cook, **Some Critical Remarks Concerning Penfield's Theory of Second Language Acquisition** by Hans W. Dechert, **Evaluating the Need for Input Enhancement in Post-Critical Period Language Acquisition** by Georgette Ioup, **Some Critical Remarks on the Phonological Component** by Zolt Lengyel, and **Is there an Age Factor for Universal Grammar?** by Gita Martohardjono and Suzanne Flynn.

Announcements

CONFERENCES AND WORKSHOPS

- **ACTFL'96:** American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Annual Meeting. 22-24 November 1996. Philadelphia, PA, USA.
- **Celtic Language Teachers' Professional Development Day.** 22 November 1996. Penn Language Center. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA. To register, contact Kara Smith at R1, Blenheim, ON, N0P 1A0, Canada or via e-mail at karasmit@village.ca.
- **NAACLT'96:** Second Annual Celtic Language Learning Conference. 23 November 1996, University of Pennsylvania. Proposals for papers should be sent to John T. McCranie, NAACLT'96, Dept. of Computer Science, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA 94123, United States of America or via e-mail to jtm@futon.sfsu.edu. Deadline for proposals is 15 March 1996.

SUBMISSIONS

- ∨ The *Journal of Celtic Language Learning* is published each autumn.
- ◇ The deadline for submissions is 15 April of each year.
- ◇ Those interested should submit four typed copies of their manuscript to Nancy Stenson, Institute of Linguistics and Asian and Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Minnesota, 190 Klæber Court, 320-16th Avenue, SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455. Keep a disk (computer) copy of the paper. It will be requested in the case of acceptance.
- ◇ All submissions should be double spaced. Articles should be 2,500 to 3,000 words and short descriptions of a program or technique should be 200 to 500 words.
- ◇ All submissions will be refereed blind by two anonymous readers.
- ◇ Comments from the referees will be forwarded to the authors together with the editors' decision regarding publishing after 15 September of the same year.