

SCAFFOLDED LANGUAGE EMERGENCE IN THE CLASSROOM. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE, Donald Kiraly, Sarah Singer. Frank & Timme, Berlin (2017). 141 pp.

This book offers an overview of the emergentist approach to language learning and teaching (Scaffolded Language Emergence, or SLE), developed as part of the project “From 0 to B1 in nine months” that began in 2008 at the School of Translation, Linguistics and Cultural Studies (FTSK) of the University of Mainz. Although the approach was initially designed for adult learners, emergentist learning can be applicable to all age groups.

The authors, Kiraly and Signer, collaborated in writing the three-section volume in a novel way: Kiraly’s sections, the first and third, outline the theoretical framework, principles and elements of the emergentist approach to language teaching and learning, and Signer’s part, the second, is an analysis of the main features of the approach from the perspective of an experienced language teacher who has never taught or participated in an emergentist course. In Kiraly’s words, Signer epitomizes the target group for this book: trained and experienced teachers interested in new approaches to language teaching. Singer’s contribution to the volume is a discussion of the examples of emergentist courses taught at the FTSK over the previous ten years, drawn from BA and MA theses that Kiraly has supervised. The final, concluding section of the book is Kiraly’s summary of the features of the SLE in the form of guidelines for teachers interested in facilitating language emergence in their own foreign language courses.

In the first chapter, Kiraly states that his approach pertains to post-method foreign language pedagogy, i.e. its realization in the classroom does not rely on detailed, structured pedagogical plans that can be shared and copied regardless of the characteristics of the learning situation. The theoretical underpinning of the approach is social constructivism based on the teaching of Lev Vygotsky (1994) and Jon Dewey (1938), and complexity theory (Davis 2004), which sees learning as a cognitive, social and embodied phenomenon. Kiraly also roots the approach in naturalistic, immersion-type language learning – so the foreign language facilitator’s role includes that of creating a “physical, social and cultural environment” that will enable the learner’s immersion in the foreign culture and language. An SLE course is organized around topics such as travel, food preparation, picnics, and similar scenarios that allow for elementary language learning. It is ideally envisaged to be intensive (at least 50-75 hours per term, ideally 25 per week) and taught by tandems or teams of teachers (facilitators) who are native or near-native speakers, so that the learners are significantly exposed to both linguistic and extra linguistic interaction before they are ready to speak.

In the following two chapters, Kiraly explains how his educational background led him toward adapting the communicative approaches from the 1970s and 1980s to create the SLE approach. These include the Structuro-Global Audio-Visual (SGAV) methods, and the Natural, Total Physical Response, Notional-Functional and Communicative approaches, whose most important features were the inclusion of physical and emotional elements in the language learning classroom, along with authentic contexts and materials, functional activities and the avoidance of linguistic jargon, language rules and native language use in the class. Kiraly preserves all of these in the SLE approach and reports on what is new – that SLE is designed so as to be highly adaptable to learners' needs in terms of procedures and topics, and that it relies on learners' autonomy.

In the fifth chapter Kiraly describes the complexity theory perspective as another novel feature of SLE. One of the hallmarks of SLE is its non-instructional, consciousness-raising approach to learning grammar, as it is based on the assumption that learning is not deductive, accumulative and dependant on direct instruction and repetition, but rather iterative, dynamic and dependant on communicative interaction. Tandem teaching is therefore best suited to facilitate such learning, because two facilitators can provide plenty of opportunities for the learners to experience authentic communication on a particular topic before they are able to say something themselves. Kiraly often underlines the differences between the traditional and emergentist approach by using the term *facilitator* rather than *teacher*. Another important difference is the concept of *affordances*, which are an SLE alternative to *input*. The difference Kiraly draws between *input* and *affordances* is that *input* is monologic (i.e. always comes from the teacher) linguistic information, slightly above the learner's level of competence and implies that knowledge can be transmitted to a learner as a passive receiver (p.46). Drawing on Gibson (1979), *affordances* on the other hand are 'opportunities for interaction that exist in the environment', which invite the learner to do something. The learner recognizes situations and actions as she hears words and expressions and understands them without recourse to the native language. This is a situation similar to that which children experience as they learn their mother tongue and is what adult learners need to experience in order for a foreign language to emerge. *Affordances* can be material (such as a chair) or experiential, in which case they are links between an individual and aspects of the environment experienced through action (p. 59). Other core concepts that are central to SLE are the *personal (pre-) dispositions* of learners, i.e. their knowledge, attitudes, willingness to learn, as well as *social signifiers*, which are ideational and cultural artefacts in the learning environment that help convey the desired meaning.

The second section of the book is entitled 'From Theory to Exemplary Practice', and Sarah Singer here presents findings from seven BA and MA dissertations about SLE courses offered at the authors' home institution. It starts with chapter seven, which is focused on the in-class use of sketches, role-plays and games that introduce new vocabulary. Chapters eight and nine address the issue of

learner autonomy, especially in relation to learning about grammar. This is where we learn how facilitators help the learners to address the issues they might have with any aspect of the language, teaching methodology or personal motivation and confidence. Signer importantly acknowledges that not all students accept a 'non-teacher-centred learning environment' or become 'prepared to take responsibility for their own learning' (p. 88) but that neither the facilitator nor the approach should be blamed for this. She cites two reasons why students may prefer a passive to an active attitude: they may not be aware that they have been conditioned to believe that only the traditional, teacher-centred learning environment is conducive to learning or they might be unwilling to take responsibility for their own learning. One of the most honest remarks here was that it is not just the students who may suffer from a certain conditioning when it comes to a preferred mode of instruction; teachers suffer from it too, as they themselves have most likely been educated in teacher-centred classrooms. The author therefore sees the SLE learning environment as requiring a process of exploration and reflection for both facilitators and learners.

In the tenth chapter Signer describes how language emergence is facilitated by classroom settings and the appropriation of the classroom's interior so that it reflects the country/culture whose language is being studied, and gives examples of several outdoor activities and games that achieve the same effect. The last chapter by Signer, the eleventh, deals in more detail with the 'foreign language only' rule, scaffolding and pre-emptive error correction. The final chapter of the book, written by Kiraly, gives an overview of the most important characteristics of the approach and a few examples to get new facilitators started.

The authors insist that the purpose of the book was not to offer a fully-developed methodology for an SLE course which could be copied and immediately applied, but rather to present their experience with the courses which have taken place at FTSK over the last decade. To a teacher eager to develop a course based on the SLE approach, this book provides a lot of information on how it is different from the prevailing communicative approaches, but it does also leave plenty of space for would-be SLE facilitators to develop their own activities. However, two of the core features depicted in the book might be difficult to realize in some contexts: a classroom decorated so that it reflects salient features of the foreign culture and the time frame for such a course. The first depends on whether there is a classroom that can be devoted just to language learning. As to the second, the authors' reports suggest that the best results are achieved when the SLE course is conducted as a short-term, intensive course, or in a semi-intensive format of 6 hours per week. This clearly depends on the overall timetable and how much time is envisaged for learners to devote to language learning. Still, even in contexts where these two obstacles are insurmountable, this book inspires innovation within current teaching practices at the very least as a source of a series of 90-minute authentic activities.

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