

HOW MUCH COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT DID HEINRICH SCHLIEMANN GET?

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The case of Heinrich Schliemann has been used as an example of someone who acquired a second language primarily by means of conscious learning. An examination of Schliemann's method, however, reveals that he probably obtained a great deal of comprehensible input in English.

INTRODUCTION

It has been hypothesized that true language acquisition occurs in only one way, from comprehensible input, and that consciously learned knowledge about a language cannot become acquired competence (Krashen, 1985). Among the objections raised to this hypothesis is the supposed existence of "well-documented cases of self-taught learners who gained facility in a language without any opportunity for 'acquiring' it. In many cases these were individuals with knowledge of several other languages who learned with great rapidity and to a remarkable level of proficiency—without contact with native speakers" (McLaughlin, 1987, p.30).

McLaughlin does not provide examples, but Horner (1987) claims that Heinrich Schliemann was this kind of learner, a person who was able to transfer linguistic knowledge "from the conscious to the unconscious stores" (p. 340):

"There is also the case of auto-didacts like Heinrich Schliemann (Jahn, 1979), a German who mastered English in six months in Amsterdam by writing, having corrected and memorizing essays while working as an office boy." (p. 340).

This is Horner's entire discussion of Schliemann, and, reading it, one gets the impression that Schliemann acquired English solely by writing essays, having them corrected, and memorizing the corrected versions. Not so. Jahn (1979) states that Schliemann did a number of other things as well: He studied with a native speaker of English every day for one hour, "read out loud for extended periods of time" (p. 273) and attended two church services in English every Sunday. He not only memorized his own corrected essays, but he also memorized other English writing (he claimed to have memorized *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *Ivanhoe*; see Ludwig, 1932, p. 63), and stated that he only needed three readings to memorize a text. He averaged about 20 pages daily, a considerable amount of input (Ludwig, 1932).¹

Schliemann devoted every spare moment to language study, reading and memorizing while on errands and while waiting in line.² Jahn estimated that in six months Schliemann was exposed to about 1350 hours of English, the equivalent of seven years of formal study.

To be sure, Schliemann's methods were not, according to the Input Hypothesis, the most efficient. If, however, he understood what he read out loud, his corrected essays, and the texts he memorized, and even partly understood the sermons he heard, he obtained a great deal of comprehensible input, enough to attain at least a reasonable level of proficiency in English.

Of course, it would be impossible to investigate every proposed instance of second language acquisition without comprehensible input. But the case of Heinrich Schliemann is not a clear instance of learning leading to acquisition. Far more common are cases of those who have done a great deal of conscious learning and have clearly not developed any real competence in the second language. For a famous example, see Diller's description of Gouin (Diller, 1971: pp. 51-53).

NOTES

¹ The only description of Schliemann's methods of language acquisition and their efficacy is Schliemann's autobiography, which is cited by several authors (Ludwig, 1932; Brackman, 1971; Jahn, 1979). While the truthfulness of Schliemann's descriptions has been questioned [". . . Schliemann's autobiographical writings are filled with fictitious episodes, distortions, and what most of us would call lies," (Traill, 1986, p. 48)], even his critics concede that he was an exceptional language acquirer (e.g. Traill, p. 64). While traveling, for example, he kept his journal in the language of the country he was visiting, most commonly in German, Greek, English and French (Calder, 1986, p. 21). Schliemann's letters in English contain errors, but Calder, a harsh critic of Schliemann, attributes these to Schliemann's editor (Calder, 1986, p. 21).

² "Bei allen meinen Botengängen trug ich, selbst wenn es regnete, ein Buch in der Hand, aus dem ich etwas auswendig lernte; auf dem Postamte wartete ich nie, ohne zu lesen." (Schliemann, 1892, quoted in Ludwig, 1932; p. 63).

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