ISLA / IFLA course design: Principles and practical proposals for beginners' courses

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00-Abstract:

Everybody involved in teaching modern languages will have observed that even adults can still have access to some kind of intuitive knowledge (Coppieters, R. 1987) when exposed naturally to a new language, and this is independent of the language taught and the age of the students (Kim, *et al*, 1997).

Looking for a theoretical explanation for these observational facts we came across an idea formulated by N. Chomsky (1965)[1], who had claimed, in one of his few pronouncements on the relevance of his theories for language teaching, that the human mind must (automatically) possess 'intuitive heuristics', which, he argued, should be part of 'teaching program(s) …. in such a way as to give free play to those creative principles that humans bring to the process of language learning'.

In this paper we will try to show how this author's ideas on competence (1965) and performance (1965, 1975, 1981) might serve as a general framework for *foreign language teaching* (A. Howatt, 1974, W. Littlewood, 1984 and Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) as they offer a quite plausible vision for explaining how different mental capacities cooperate when people use language for communication.

Starting with a brief description of Chomsky's competence model we will then analyse input, Chomsky's central concept for language acquisition. This will be done under the perspective of the processes that can be supposed for comprehension and in terms of Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).
RT will then be reinterpreted, as Javier Garcia (2007) proposes, in the light of Michael Long's here-and-now principle (1983).

In the last part, we will offer first a brief summary of the practical measures for classroom interaction developed during our long-term study, carried out between 2005 and 2015, measures that pretend to assure a natural like language processing in the classroom, and the paper concludes with a first brief summary of observational data on the results obtained so far.

The principal conclusions proposed are twofold:
With respect to theory, this paper claims that adults still seem to have a limited access to children's Language Acquisition Device: the Adult-LAD.
And, in practical terms: foreign language teaching should not begin with grammar teaching, but with immersion centred on communication.

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1 *cf.* R.W. Blair (1982: 13, note 6)

01- Method: Proposals for a theoretical framework.

01.1. Noam Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device (LAD):

While for F. de Saussure (1915[3]: 14) 'language (is) not a function of the speaker (but) a product that is passively assimilated by the individual', N. Chomsky (1965: 59) claims that language is 'a complex human achievement', that must necessarily be the result of 'millions of years of evolution'.

He proposes thus an active and creative role of the human mind, triggered by genetics.

In his opinion human minds must have some kind of mental organ, which he calls the LAD, the Language Acquisition Device, that is responsible for this achievement.

Chomsky (1981: 35) provides the following simple formula:

Experience ———————▶ LAD ———————▶grammar

The progressive development of the LAD was first described by Chomsky in his 'Syntactic Structures'(1965: 56) and can be resumed graphically as follows.
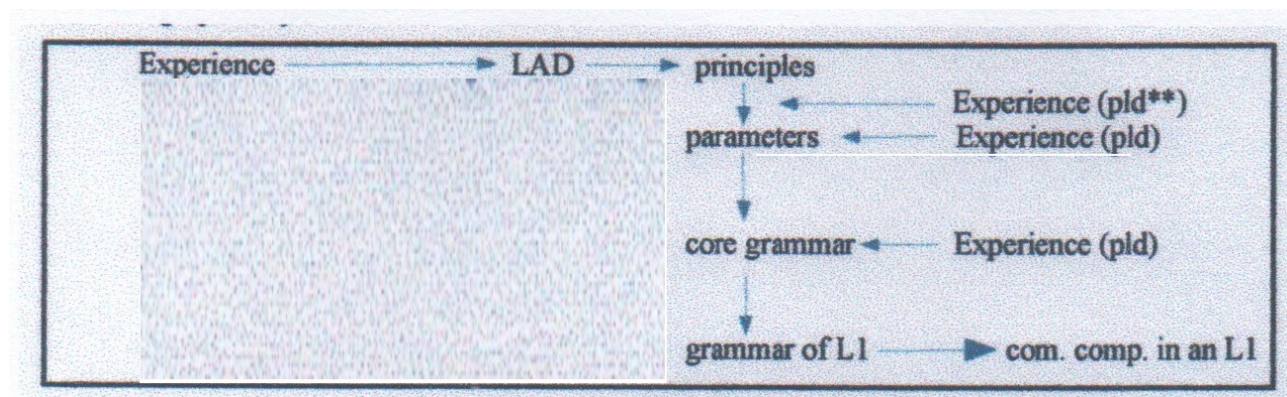


pld: primary linguistic data // input

Experience triggers the LAD, which is responsible for the triggering of parameters and the creation of principles and a core grammar, that finally lead to the formation of a complete grammatical competence in the human mind.

In terms of modern computer language, the LAD can be considered as the origin of a self-forming operational system, that creates the mental capacity for classifying and structuring incoming and outgoing data.

01.2. Noam Chomsky's claims on the factors that determine individual performance:

Nevertheless, Chomsky (1965: 56) has always claimed that "The language acquisition device is only one component of the total system of intellectual structures … in other words, the *faculté de langage* is only one of the faculties of the mind."

We can resume these ideas in the following graphic:
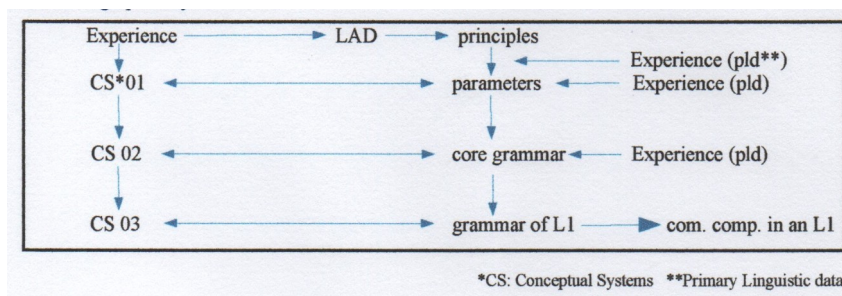
The left column now shows that the creation of a communicative competence needs the parallel evolution of Human Conceptual Systems (CS), where 'CS01', 'CS02' and 'CS03' represent the gradual formation of these systems.

From the point of view of Applied Linguistics, and though Chomsky concentrates exclusively on grammatical competence, he thus remembers us, that **performance**, the individual communicative competence, can only exist when grammatical competence works hand-in-hand with many other mental capacities.

The same author gives the following two definitions of *Human Conceptual Systems*:

In "Reflexions …" (cf. 1975: 35)
- the faculty of mind that constructs what we might call 'common sense understanding',
- a system of beliefs, expectations and knowledge concerning the nature and behaviour of objects,
- principles that bear on the place and role of people in a social world,
- the nature and conditions of work,
- the structure of human action,
- will and choice, and so on.

In "Principles and Parameters" (cf. 1981: 35/36):
- properties and conditions of reference,
- knowledge and belief about the world,
- conditions of appropriate use of language (so-called 'pragmatical competence'), and so on.

Resuming:

Human Conceptual Systems (CS) are co-responsible for the growth of languages in the human mind and also necessary for any individual speaker's *performance*.

Our claim is, that if adults still seem to have a limited access to intuitive knowledge, this model should also be valid for adult language acquisition.

In what language teaching concerns, this model reminds us that 'knowing a language' is not only a conscious, grammar-oriented task, but comprises many other mental capacities (logical and emotional ones), which are partly unconscious.

01.03. Noam Chomsky's language model and the acquisition of second or third languages

Since Lenneberg (1967) published his influential book, most linguists have agreed that acquisition processes limit themselves to the 'critical period' (0 to 3 years) and disappear afterwards.

Nowadays it is widely accepted that, if the LAD is not stimulated during this period it seems to atrophy, leaving the mind with a lifelong incapacity to develop normal speech.

In this paper we propose to analyse Chomsky's model under the point of view of performance:

If we can observe that even adults still have access to some kind of intuitive knowledge (cf. R. Coppieters, 1987), we can abandon any extreme interpretation of Chomsky's competence model and use its dual model (garmmatical competence + human conceptual systems) for analysing how we could imagine the growth of a new communicative competence in adults.

We will consider this model as a simple, but comprehensive description of the elements the mind needs for performance:

For acquisition to take place in a new language, experience / input must necessarily provoke changes on two levels, changes that lead to a gradual development of a new structuring capacity, guided by the LAD, and a gradual transformation of the conceptual systems of the L1 into new ones, belonging to the new language acquired.

In the adult age, acquirers must therefore have access to both: acquisition and learning.

As Rastelli (2014) claims: 'Grammatically learned procedural phrase structure rules and statistically learned declarative templates can be resorted to during language processing under different circumstances'.

This does not mean, of course, that we claim that acquisition can be the same in childhood as in the adult age, nor that classroom acquisition can produce the same results as 'adequate and continuous experience' (Chomsky, 1970: 32/33) in a natural settings, but the results of *foreign language teaching* should certainly improve, if we managed to trigger at least some kind of intuitive knowledge in our students' minds. (cf. S.P. Corder, 1980: 11)

The following graphic tries to resume these ideas:
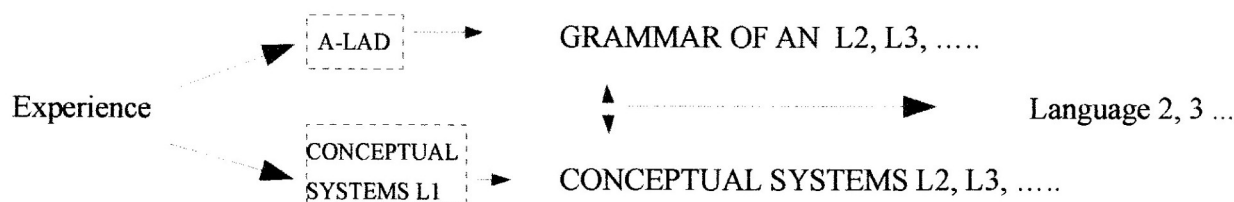
It shows in the first place that we have to distinguish between the LAD in childhood and the one active in the adult age.

Our claim is to call the LAD active in the adult age the 'Adult-LAD' (A-LAD).

On the other hand the Human Conceptual Systems developed during L1 acquisition have to be modified towards the ones used in the target language.

This vision is also shared by Susanne E. Carroll's (2001)[2] who had claimed that while first language acquisition "requires some initial representational system(s) in which the various acoustic/phonetic, phonological, morphosyntactic and semantic properties of language are encoded ….. in the case of second language acquisition, the relevant set consists of every representational system the learner has in place at the point in time when L2 acquisition occurs, including a mature and rich culture-specific conceptual system, the specific grammar of the L1, the specific parsing and production system associated with the L1, a mature acoustic perceptional system, a mature visual perception system, a mature set of domain specific problem solving systems, and so on. All the evidence available provides support for the assumption that adults come to the acquisition task capable of deploying their mature representational systems to the purpose of acquiring the L2. ..."

Tej B. Shresta (2008) equally claimed that "adults have access to two distinct approaches to develop their second language competence. These are instruction and exposure … (being her) main finding ...that both instruction and exposure contributed to second language acquisition in their own unique ways. The former seemed to promote accuracy and the latter fluency. For communication purposes, however, fluency seemed to be more critical than accuracy," she stated.

Nevertheless, with respect to foreign language acquisition in the classroom, there is yet another problem to be solved:

If in an adult's mind both systems are fully developed, in foreign language acquisition the question is where input should be directed to in the first place in order to trigger a new competence:

- to the A-LAD to initiate afterwards the formation of new Conceptual Systems (case A),

- or to Human Conceptual Systems, whose progressive development would then affect gradually the A-LAD (case B)?

The following graphic resumes the two possibilities (A) and (B):

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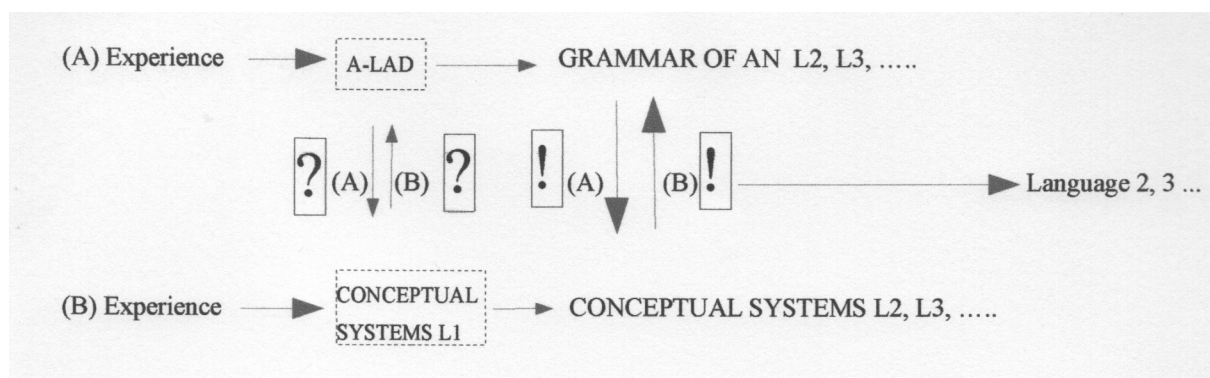
2   Cited in Geoff Jordan (204: 225f)

In our opinion, and in the light of observational facts only the possibility B) is acceptable.

The possibility A) is not only implausible, but quite impossible: Experience shows us, that nobody has been able to observe or to proof, that conscious grammar study on its own is capable of producing some kind of intuitive control of a new language system.

In history, we find several opinions, that seem to support this view:

- John Locke (1693), Leibniz (1696 / 2018) and Condillac (1777) had insisted on concentrating first on practice when entering a new language.

- In more recent studies E. Hatch (1978: 404), J. Yalden, (1983: 14), and R. Ellis (1984), P. VanPatten P. *et al.* (1987), P. VanPatten (1992), among many others, have proposed an identical view.

Our claim is, that if the triggering of foreign language acquisition in the classroom first requires changes in the existing Human Conceptual Systems, we should give our students the chance to experience the new language proactively in the classroom, especially in the early stages of 'learning'.

In order to determine what kind of input might be necessary for reaching this goal, we turned to Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1986) for help.

01.04. Relevance Theory and mother-tongue comprehension: Relevance Theory as a model of input processing[3].

Sperber and Wilson's model proposes that human comprehension is directed by an innate biological mechanism called *The Principle of Optimal Relevance*, whose principle aim is to achieve a Maximum of Contextual Effects with a Minimum of Processing Effort.

And it does so, by evaluating continuously two aspects:

1) the linguistic code, on the basis of which it realizes logical inferences, and …

2) suppositions related to the cognitive environment of the speaker/hearers: their world knowledge, their knowledge related to the situation, to sociolinguistic categories and to imagination.

In a few words: meaning is NOT only encoded in words.

The following graphic shows these proposals:

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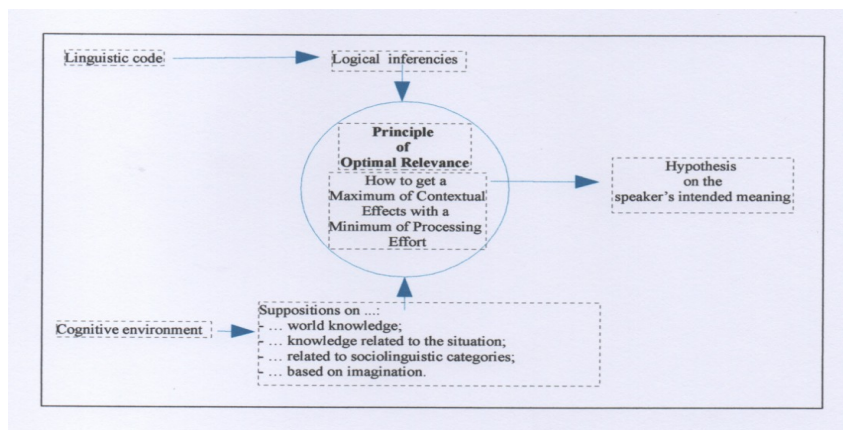
3   *cf.* Haidl, A. (1993)

As a simple example we might imagine the utterance "Good morning!"

Pronounced at a certain time (in the morning) and in a certain context (when somebody approaches a person or a group of people), all of us will interpret instantaneously that the speaker's intended meaning is 's/he is greeting'.

01.05. Relevance Theory and comprehension processes in zero-beginners.

At first sight it may seem that this theory cannot be applied to absolute beginners as these are defined as people who do not know any vocabulary / linguistic code of the new language.

In order to explain what might happen in the case when learners/ acquirers are absolute beginners, Michael Long's (1983) 'here-and-now principle' proposes an interesting idea. It claims that utterances can be understood, when they refer to the 'here-and-now', that is to the immediate context.

Javier García (2007) had dared to forward a possible explanation for this observation from the point of view of Relevance Theory.
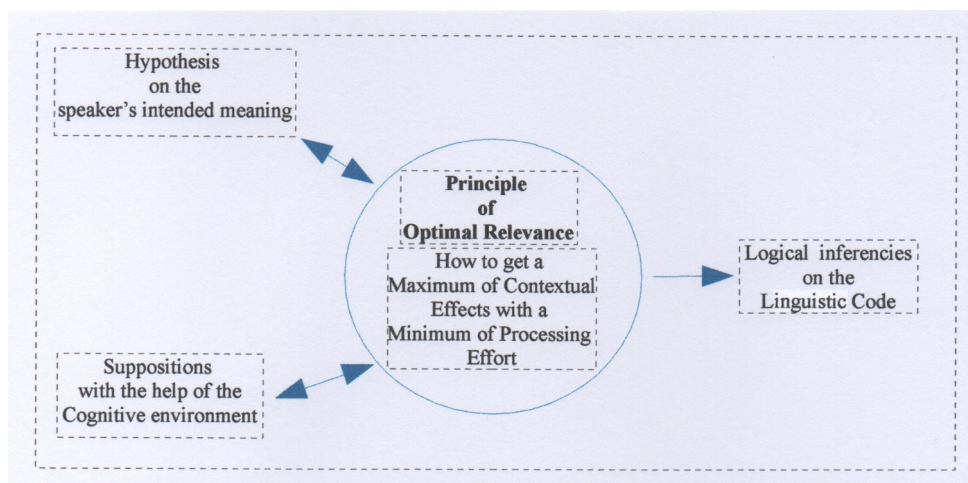
In his opinion, Long's 'here-and-now' principle might be seen as a proof that the Principle of Optimal Relevance can also work in a different direction. It seems to be able to start with hypothesis on the speaker's intended meaning and combine them with suppositions related to the cognitive environment, in order to realize logical inferences on the linguistic code.

With the help of the simple example given above for "greeting" his idea is quite easy to explain:

If a person, in a personal context, hears somebody say "Good morning!", and if s/he formulates the hypothesis that her/his intended meaning is 's/he's greeting', s/he can infer, together with the contextual information (the time, customs, etc), and what s/he's doing (approaching a person or a group of people), that s/he seems to greet, and that "Good morning!" is the word (the linguistic code) that serves for this purpose in this part of the day.

01.06. From theory to practice: A summary of our theoretical claims

- Language is a genetics-based, natural human capacity.
- Language growth needs a holistic approach, it has to foster all mental capacities: social and personal ones, as well as logical and emotional ones.
- In second and foreign language development the A-LAD is no longer the central mental capacity for language growth, but competes with all other mental faculties developed during first language acquisition.
- Input, in the sense of natural language data, has to be considered the central category for language development.
- In adult language acquisition new semantic categories have to be developed first, which means that language growth has to start necessarily on the level of 'human conceptual systems'.
- In order to understand what natural input is about, Relevance Theory has been incorporated in this approach.
- Relevance Theory claims that language data are evaluated unconsciously by the Principle of Optimal Relevance combining two mental processes.

> - inference processes based on the linguistic code;
> - logical and context-dependent suppositions, that are being evaluated according to their possible relevance and following the central principle of Relevance Theory;.
> Both aspects are always evaluated in order to reach a maximum of contextual effects, with a minimum of processing effort.

- In the case of a mother-tongue, the results of our efforts to understand a speaker/hearer always consist in hypothesis on the speaker's intended meaning, hypothesis that cannot be reached evaluating only the linguistic code or only contextual or logical categories.
- In the case of new languages, and in order to account for Michael Long's 'here-and-now principle', it is necessary to accept Javier Garcia's claim, in the sense that the Principle of Optimal Relevance can also work in a different direction: if a person can realise hypothesis on a speaker/hearer's intended meaning, and if he shares knowledge or assumptions on contextual effects, s/he seems to be able to infer consciously the meaning of words and phrases used in a personal, immediate context.
- In order to allow these processes to work, a methodology based on these principles needs to direct students' attention away from grammar and isolated vocabulary, and give them hints first and information afterwards, on what their teachers pretend to do in class, how s/he will try to do it and to provide students with information and clues on how to approach interaction in the classroom.
- We therefore part from the conviction that processes observable in natural language acquisition can be reproduced in the classroom if the teacher manages to provide the clues necessary for natural comprehension processes to work, and if students are willing to do so.

Finally, this model can give us interesting hints for why acquisition usually works outside the classroom and not inside it.

Language teachers usually **concentrate**, from the first day onwards and almost exclusively, **on grammar**, and try to build, by conscious study, a grammatical competence that is, biologically speaking, an unconscious natural capacity. that needs for its growth the interaction with other mental capacities.

02. Headings on Relevance Theory as a possible guideline for classroom interaction

For obvious reasons it is impossible to give here a complete description of all the measures developed during our experiment[4].

We will thus concentrate on those that are directly related with Relevance Theory, that is with our proposal to allow our students inference processes and contextual suppositions during their classes.

02.01. Explications given by the teacher in the students mother tongue at the beginning of the course:

02.01.1 On the structure of our classes

1)- The principle measure to help our students in comprehension is a lesson plan, that repeats itself every day, remembering them, that all classes will have more or less the same structure:

- Types of activities separated neatly by the teacher.
- Manner of presentation.

We inform them, that we will do this by ...

- Short dialogues...
- pronunciation exercises…
- practising basic vocabulary for everyday conversations:
- numbers in different contexts
- presentation of interrogative pronouns

2)- We equally inform them, that when doing these activities, we will divide the classroom and create or recreate different scenarios (*cf.* DiPietro, RJ, 1987)...

All students will move around the classroom... ('Stationenlernen', *cf.* M. Teichmann, 2002)

This way, we pretend to prepare them for understanding and assimilating gradually small dialogues.

02.01.2. Kind of information given on the contents of our classes:

Another measure that pretends making students' suppositions and hypotheses easier, is giving them information on the contents they will come across during our classes:

1)- To start off with, we inform them, that we will train group formation.

The results of our 'orders' are supposed to offer help immediately.

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4 *cf.* Haidl, A. (1996, 1998, 2003, 2012); Zayas Martinez, Francisco (2000)

2)- Furthermore, they should know that they will be gradually presented those communicative elements (formulae and vocabulary) we consider absolutely necessary for survival in German in the classroom and for the organization of activities.

We follow here a '*communicative progression*':

- we will start with formulae for establishing contact with a person (formal and informal)

- afterwards we will learn how introduce ourselves and introduce another person,

- then, we will train solutions for problems of incomprehension, employing strategies like:

    ● for time gaining,

    ● trying to repeat ourselves

    ● adding a comment.

- finally we will start practising formulae that allow us …

    ● to ask for, or demand something

    ● to propose something

    ● to enquire about the likes and dislikes of the other person.

    ● to ask another person if s/he has something or if s/he knows something we are interested in:

This information is supposed to enable them, when the moment comes, to find out first, what we pretend them to do, and then to infer the meaning of words and formulae, and finally use and answer them.

The same procedure is also recommended to them, when interacting with their peers, especially in small groups: They should always try to find out in the first place, what they pretend to do!

- Do they pretend to present themselves, or somebody else?

- Is it necessary to beg their pardon or to ask them for something?

Their central task in this process should be to memorize and practise those 'communicative functions' necessary for realizing these functions.

02.01.3. On 'teacher-talk'[5]

With respect to the '**teachers'-talk**' we finally underline that this will help them not to get lost in a jungle of new sounds:

It's characteristics are:

- use of frequent / easy words;

- use of short sentences;

- use of repetitions;

- use of gestures, drawings on the blackboard, pictures from internet and international words .

- What we will NOT do: reduce our speed artificially: only so students will get accustomed to 'normal German'.

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5   *cf.* St. D. Krashen (1982).

03. First evaluations of the results obtained

03.01. An external survey realized by the university:

In the University's survey, realized at the end of each semester among the students of all careers and for all subjects, the results obtained use to be well above the media of our Modern Languages Department, the faculty and the university itself, reaching almost every year a global approval between 4,2 and 5, where 5 is the maximum.

03.02. An internal survey realized at the beginning of the third year

At the beginning of the third semester our students are being asked to answer an anonymous internal survey, which tries to find out if their expectations have been fulfilled and if they accept our methodological proposals especially in what monolingualism concerns and the concentration on interaction, instead of grammar.

Again this survey shows an overwhelming acceptance of the methods and contents introduced.

03.03. Observational data on the level of acquisition reached by our students

The fact that our students maintain the willingness to be exposed systematically to the target language throughout the course, can be considered as an indicator, that they actually start acquisition at Ellis' *primary level*, as they seem to develop the capacity to understand words and formulae introduced and used naturally by the teacher during classroom interaction. They don't need time for conscious translation and start producing single word utterances at the end of the first term.
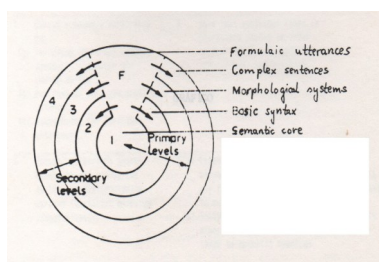
R. Ellis, 1984: 174

03.04. Material waiting for a detailed evaluation

Since 2005 we have taped hundreds of videos of students' oral performance in our exams, recordings that are still waiting for being evaluated systematically.

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