

# Myths and Misconceptions About Second Language Learning

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As the school-aged population changes, teachers all over the country are challenged with instructing more children with limited English skills. Thus, all teachers need to know something about how children learn a second language (L2). Intuitive assumptions are often mistaken, and children can be harmed if teachers have unrealistic expectations of the process of L2 learning and its relationship to the acquisition of other academic skills and knowledge.

As any adult who has tried to learn another language can verify, second language learning can be a frustrating experience. This is no less the case for children, although there is a widespread belief that children are facile second language learners. This digest discusses commonly held myths and misconceptions about children and second language learning and the implications for classroom teachers.

## Myth 1: Children Learn Second Languages Quickly And Easily.

Typically, people who assert the superiority of child learners claim that children's brains are more flexible (e.g., Lenneberg, 1967). Current research challenges this biological imperative, arguing that different rates of L2 acquisition may reflect psychological and social factors that favor child learners (Newport, 1990). Research comparing children to adults has consistently demonstrated that adolescents and adults perform better than young children under controlled conditions (e.g., Snow & Hoefnagel-Hoehle, 1978). One exception is pronunciation, although even here some studies show better results for older learners.

Nonetheless, people continue to believe that children learn languages faster than adults. Is this superiority illusory? Let us consider the criteria of language proficiency for a child and an adult. A child does not have to learn as much as an adult to achieve communicative competence. A child's constructions are shorter and simpler, and vocabulary is smaller. Hence, although it appears that the child learns more quickly than the adult, research results typically indicate that adult and adolescent learners perform better.

Teachers should not expect miraculous results from children learning English as a second language (ESL) in the classroom. At the very least, they should anticipate that learning a second language is as difficult for a child as it is for an adult. It may be even more difficult, since young children do not have access to the memory techniques and other strategies that more experienced learners use in acquiring vocabulary and in learning grammatical rules.

Nor should it be assumed that children have fewer inhibitions than adults when they make mistakes in an L2. Children are more likely to be shy and embarrassed around peers than are adults. Children from some cultural backgrounds are extremely anxious when singled out to perform in a language they are in the process of learning. Teachers should not assume that, because children supposedly learn second languages quickly, such discomfort will readily pass.

## Myth 2: The Younger The Child, The More Skilled In Acquiring An L2

Some researchers argue that the earlier children begin to learn a second language, the better (e.g., Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979). However, research does not support this conclusion in school settings. For example,

a study of British children learning French in a school context concluded that, after 5 years of exposure, older children were better L2 learners (Stern, Burstall, & Harley, 1975). Similar results have been found in other European studies (e.g., Florander & Jansen, 1968).

These findings may reflect the mode of language instruction used in Europe, where emphasis has traditionally been placed on formal grammatical analysis. Older children are more skilled in dealing with this approach and hence might do better. However, this argument does not explain findings from studies of French immersion programs in Canada, where little emphasis is placed on the formal aspects of grammar. On tests of French language proficiency, Canadian English-speaking children in late immersion programs (where the L2 is introduced in Grade 7 or 8) have performed as well or better than children who began immersion in kindergarten or Grade 1 (Genesee, 1987).

Pronunciation is one area where the younger-is-better assumption may have validity. Research (e.g., Oyama, 1976) has found that the earlier a learner begins a second language, the more native-like the accent he or she develops.

The research cited above does not suggest, however, that early exposure to an L2 is detrimental. An early start for "foreign" language learners, for example, makes a long sequence of instruction leading to potential communicative proficiency possible and enables children to view second language learning and related cultural insights as normal and integral. Nonetheless, ESL instruction in the United States is different from foreign language instruction. Language minority children in U.S. schools need to master English as quickly as possible while learning subject-matter content. This suggests that early exposure to English is called for. However, because L2 acquisition takes time, children continue to need the support of their first language, where this is possible, to avoid falling behind in content area learning.

Teachers should have realistic expectations of their ESL learners. Research suggests that older students will show quicker gains, though younger children may have an advantage in pronunciation. Certainly, beginning language instruction in Grade 1 gives children more exposure to the language than beginning in Grade 6, but exposure in itself does not predict language acquisition.

## Myth 3: The More Time Students Spend In A Second Language Context, The Quicker They Learn The Language.

Many educators believe children from non-English-speaking backgrounds will learn English best through structured immersion, where they have ESL classes and content-based instruction in English. These programs provide more time on task in English than bilingual classes.

Research, however, indicates that this increased exposure to English does not necessarily speed the acquisition of English. Over the length of the program, children in bilingual classes, with exposure to the home language and to English, acquire English language skills equivalent to those acquired by children who have been in English-only programs (Cummins, 1981; Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991). This would not be expected if time on task were the most important factor in language learning.

Researchers also caution against withdrawing home language support too soon and suggest that although oral communication skills in a second language may be acquired within 2 or 3 years, it may take 4 to 6 years to acquire the level of proficiency needed for understanding the language in its academic uses (Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1981).

Teachers should be aware that giving language minority children support in the home language is beneficial. The use of the home language in bilingual classrooms enables children to maintain grade-level school work, reinforces the bond between the home and the school, and allows them to participate more effectively in school activities. Furthermore, if the children acquire literacy skills in the first language, as adults they may be functionally bilingual, with an advantage in technical or professional careers.

#### **Myth 4: Children Have Acquired An L2 Once They Can Speak It.**

Some teachers assume that children who can converse comfortably in English are in full control of the language. Yet for school-aged children, proficiency in face-to-face communication does not imply proficiency in the more complex academic language needed to engage in many classroom activities. Cummins (1980) cites evidence from a study of 1,210 immigrant children in Canada who required much longer (approximately 5 to 7 years) to master the disembedded cognitive language required for the regular English curriculum than to master oral communicative skills.

Educators need to be cautious in exiting children from programs where they have the support of their home language. If children who are not ready for the all-English classroom are mainstreamed, their academic success may be hindered. Teachers should realize that mainstreaming children on the basis of oral language assessment is inappropriate.

All teachers need to be aware that children who are learning in a second language may have language problems in reading and writing that are not apparent if their oral abilities are used to gauge their English proficiency. These problems in academic reading and writing at the middle and high school levels may stem from limitations in vocabulary and syntactic knowledge. Even children who are skilled orally can have such gaps.

#### **Myth 5: All Children Learn An L2 In The Same Way.**

Most teachers would probably not admit that they think all children learn an L2 in the same way or at the same rate. Yet, this assumption seems to underlie a great deal of practice. Cultural anthropologists have shown that mainstream U.S. families and families from minority cultural backgrounds have different ways of talking (Heath, 1983). Mainstream children are accustomed to a deductive, analytic style of talking, whereas many culturally diverse children are accustomed to an inductive style. U.S. schools emphasize language functions and styles that predominate in mainstream families. Language is used to communicate meaning, convey information, control social behavior, and solve problems, and children are rewarded for clear and logical thinking. Children who use language in a different manner often experience frustration.

Social class also influences learning styles. In urban, literate, and technologically advanced societies, middle-class parents teach their children through language. Traditionally, most teaching in less technologically advanced, non-urbanized cultures is carried out nonverbally, through observation, supervised participation, and self-initiated repetition (Rogoff, 1990). There is none of the information testing through questions that characterizes the teaching-learning process in urban and suburban middle-class homes.

In addition, some children are more accustomed to learning from peers than from adults. Cared for and taught by older siblings or cousins, they learn to be quiet in the presence of adults and have little interaction with them. In school, they are likely to pay more attention to what their peers are doing than to what the teacher is saying.

Individual children also react to school and learn differently within groups. Some children are outgoing and sociable and learn the second language quickly. They do not worry about mistakes, but use limited resources to generate input from native speakers. Other children are shy and quiet. They learn by listening and watching. They say little, for fear of making a mistake. Nonetheless, research shows that both types of learners can be successful second language learners.

In a school environment, behaviors such as paying attention and persisting at tasks are valued. Because of cultural differences, some children may find the interpersonal setting of the school culture difficult. If the teacher is unaware of such cultural differences, their expectations and interactions with these children may be influenced.

Effective instruction for children from culturally diverse backgrounds requires varied instructional activities that consider the children's diversity of experience. Many important educational innovations in current practice have resulted from teachers adapting instruction for children from culturally diverse backgrounds. Teachers need to recognize that experiences in the home and home culture affect children's values, patterns of language use, and interpersonal style. Children are likely to be more responsive to a teacher who affirms the values of the home culture.

#### **Conclusion**

Research on second language learning has shown that many misconceptions exist about how children learn languages. Teachers need to be aware of these misconceptions and realize that quick and easy solutions are not appropriate for complex problems. Second language learning by school-aged children takes longer, is harder, and involves more effort than many teachers realize.

We should focus on the opportunity that cultural and linguistic diversity provides. Diverse children enrich our schools and our understanding of education in general. In fact, although the research of the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning has been directed at children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, much of it applies equally well to mainstream students.

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## **Teaching English Abroad: An Introduction** **Don Snow, Amity Foundation, Overseas Coordination Office**

*This digest is drawn from *More than a Native Speaker: An Introduction for Volunteers Teaching Abroad*, by Don Snow. It is available from TESOL, 1600 Cameron Street, Suite 300, Alexandria, VA 22314. The book provides a nontechnical introduction to English teaching that is geared toward the special needs of native-English-speaking teachers working abroad.*

Each year, thousands of men and women from English-speaking nations go abroad as English teachers through agencies such as the Peace Corps or Voluntary Service Overseas, or through myriad other government, church, business, and academic organizations. For these novice English teachers, the challenge of learning what to do in the classroom is compounded by the difficult process of adjusting to life in a foreign culture. Teaching English as a novice teacher in a foreign country is very different from teaching as a trained professional in an English-speaking country, and knowing how to speak English is not the same as knowing how to teach English. Learning the craft of language teaching by trial and error is a process that can take a long time and involve considerable wear and tear on teachers and on students. This digest offers novice English teachers an introduction to teaching English abroad.

### **Know Before You Go**

Before leaving home, there are several ways you can prepare to teach abroad. One way is to talk to people who have lived in the host country, especially those who have served there as teachers. Through a local university, you can often locate native citizens of the host country or other individuals who have lived or worked there. It is also a good idea to start looking for books about the culture and history of the host country before you leave. Books in English in the host country may be scarce, and often those that are available provide only a limited perspective.

Another form of predeparture preparation is English teaching experience. Many community organizations and churches run volunteer-taught English classes for immigrants and refugees. Although teaching English to immigrants in an English-speaking country is different from teaching English abroad, the experience can provide opportunities for learning to communicate with people whose native language is not English. One of the most important skills a language teacher should have is the ability to make instructions understood. Practicing in your home country helps to hone that skill. This kind of teaching experience will also put you in contact with people who are undergoing the difficulties involved in adjusting to a foreign culture. Understanding their culture shock experience may help you as you adjust to life in your host country.

A final way to prepare in advance is to collect resources for your classes. This may be difficult, as you may have little or no information in advance about your particular teaching situation. The best solution is to be prepared for a variety of situations; flexibility is key. Because you may be unsure of the teaching context, a general repertoire of useful materials should include one or two books on language teaching, a book on English grammar, a writing text that contains ideas on how to structure a writing class, a book of listening and speaking activities, and a book of cultural information about your home country that can be used for culture lessons. Photographs of your country, family, or hometown are good conversation starters, and a tape recorder and a short-wave radio will give you access to worldwide English news broadcasts and allow you to tape listening materials. The materials that you choose should be adaptable to students of different skill levels, work in large or small class situations, and not require audiovisual or duplication equipment which may be unavailable.

### **After Arrival: Before the First Day of Class**

Besides adjusting to your immediate surroundings, your priorities may center around planning the first day of class. No matter how strong the desire is to jump into preparing the first lessons, it is important to devote a day or so to getting a lay of the land. As part of the self-orientation process, it will be helpful to find out as much about your teaching situation as possible. Here are some questions to which you might want to find answers before the first day of class:

- Why are your students learning English?
- What are reasonable expectations for student progress?
- What are the students' goals? The goals of the school?
- What teaching methods is a teacher expected to use?
- What learning strategies and styles are students accustomed to?
- What kinds of teaching materials and equipment are available?
- How readily can materials be duplicated?
- What is available in the classroom?
- How many students will be in your classes?
- How much are teachers expected to know?
- How are teachers supposed to behave in class? Expected to dress?
- What expectations exist about teacher-student relationships?

### **First Days of Class**

It is often after you have made contact with your students that you are able to make good decisions about specific goals and methods for your course. The first few class periods are an important part of the information-gathering process. In addition to learning students' names, it is equally important to get a sense of their English skill levels, their attitudes toward English study,

how easy they will be to work with, and how well they understand explanations and classroom instructions.

## Planning Your Course

First, you should have a plan that gives direction and coherence to your course. Initially, your plans will be very general as you are most likely not in a position to lay out your daily lesson plans for a whole semester. However, having an initial set of goals and plans for materials, methods, and evaluation will help ensure that both you and your students know where you are going.

## Goals

The objective of a course will vary depending on the students' needs, skill levels, study habits, and expectations as well as on materials, facilities, equipment, and institutional guidelines and expectations. Goal setting will depend on the teaching context; different situations call for different kinds of goals. For example, if all participants in the course are high school students preparing for a nationwide standardized exam that determines their opportunity for further education, the goal of the course is clear: help students develop the skills they need to pass the exam. In other settings, students come to class with varied needs, making it difficult to tailor the goals of the course to specific needs. In such a context, the following approaches may work best:

- **Focus on developing a balanced, general set of English skills.** It is no doubt desirable to develop all of the language skills to a high level, but time limitations often demand that you make choices. For example, it is usually better if students' listening skills are more advanced than their speaking skills. Even native speakers of a language can generally understand more than they can say, and there are many situations that depend entirely on listening skills.
- **Emphasize basic knowledge and skills.** Rather than emphasizing situation-specific skills, stick with the basics. For example, stressing general communication skills is more important than stressing the fine points of job interviews.
- **Include a mix of skill goals and content goals.** Some students are better at memorizing, while others may be better at communication or grammar. By including both skill goals (e.g., listening, speaking) and content goals (e.g., vocabulary, grammar), you give students with different strengths the opportunity to demonstrate their ability.
- **Attend to affective factors.** Having explicitly stated goals can make students feel better about their language study, thereby improving the chances they will learn willingly and be able to sustain that willingness over the long haul. General long-term goals enhance student morale by giving a sense of direction; short-term goals let them see their progress in the duration of the course.

## Materials

Unlike goals, the choice of materials may be limited. In some situations, the curriculum may prescribe a specific textbook. Other situations may provide a text but allow opportunities for using supplementary materials. In some cases, the available text may be old and uninspiring, and the institution may not require that you use it. There is merit, however, in trying to make some use of the textbook rather than abandoning it all together. Having a textbook saves time in lesson preparation, provides course continuity, makes it easier for students to review, and can help students feel better about their English study.

## Methods

The best way to develop a skill is to practice it, and the more the practice resembles the actual application of the skill, the better. Simply put, the way to learn to speak is to practice speaking. This might seem obvious, but often methods are passed down from earlier generations of teachers and students, and the methods do not always fit the goals of the course.

While methods should be chosen on the basis of pedagogical soundness, they should also be acceptable to the students. Methods that are educationally sound may not work in a course because they are too unfamiliar or uncomfortable to the students. In English as a foreign language settings, this is particularly important as students in the class will share a number of common beliefs and customs about language study, and you run into resistance if your methods conflict too much with your students' ideas. It is important for students to learn how to design and carry out their own language learning plans because this is what they will do when they leave formal instruction. The best study program is one that is realistic given the time and resources available.

## Evaluation

Evaluation methods have tremendous power to affect positively or negatively the ways your students study, and you need to make good use of this impact to encourage students to study in productive ways. You need to begin thinking about evaluation when you are planning your course rather than waiting until the middle or end of the semester and then wondering how you can put together a midterm or final exam. In addition, you will need to learn the language and culture of grading of your host country; otherwise, your grades may not communicate what they intend.

## Lesson Planning and Classroom Survival

During the first few months, your main priority may be getting through as many class periods as possible without disasters, such as exercises that take twice as long as planned or instructions

that students completely misunderstand. In a study of one effective reading teacher, Richards (1990) concluded that several qualities were inherent in the lessons: (1) they were designed around the goals set for the course; (2) the instructor made his theories of language learning and teaching explicit to the class; and (3) the lessons had a clear structure-there was an order to the activities, and students were given an idea of the length of the activity in advance. The net effect of constructing lessons as above is that they have a strong sense of direction. Not only were course goals translated clearly into lesson plans, but the connection was made clear to the students.

The best way to make sure you have enough material for a class and that the lessons have a clear sense of direction is to plan each lesson. Two habits help ensure that you prepare adequately. First, set aside a block of time for planning lessons. While time is usually scheduled for class or set aside for grading, lesson planning is often relegated to what is left over from other activities. Second, write lesson plans out rather than memorize them. This forces you to think through your lessons carefully and helps you refine the details. It also provides a written record for future planning. Another way to give your lessons continuity is to use a set of techniques on a regular basis. Drawing from a set menu of tasks also reduces the amount of time you spend explaining the activities to the class and helps the students relax, as they have a sense of what they are doing (Stevick, 1988).

### **Adapting to Your Host Culture**

Adapting comfortably to life in the host country is important for both your well-being and your teaching. You may find that the efficiency or living conditions of your host country or the organization of your host institution are not what you had imagined; careful consideration of your expectations before you enter the new culture is important. It is not uncommon to experience culture fatigue or burnout as part of the adaptation process. Until you have gained a comfortable mastery of life abroad, life in your host country will place considerable demands on your reserves of energy. Learning about the host culture and learning to speak the host language can help speed the adaptation process, while offering you the significant rewards of living abroad and increasing your self-reliance.

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# Principles of Instructed Second Language Acquisition

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Second language acquisition (SLA) researchers do not agree how instruction can best facilitate language learning. Given this lack of consensus, it might be thought unwise to attempt to formulate a set of general principles for instructed language acquisition. However, if SLA is to offer teachers guidance, there is a need to proffer advice, providing that it is offered in the spirit of what Stenhouse (1975) called “provisional specifications.” The principles described in this digest, therefore, are intended to provide teachers with a basis for argument and for reflection and not as a set of prescriptions or proscriptions about how to teach. They are designed to be general in nature and therefore relevant to teachers in a variety of settings, including foreign and second language situations and content-based classrooms.

## Principle 1: Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence

There is now widespread acceptance of the importance played by formulaic expressions in the acquisition of a second language. Examples of such formulaic expressions are shown in Figure 1. Native speakers have been shown to use a much larger number of formulaic expressions than even advanced second language learners (Foster, 2001). Formulaic expressions may also serve as a basis for the later development of a rule-based competence. Classroom studies by Ellis (1984) and Myles, Mitchell, and Hooper (1999) demonstrate that learners often internalize rote-learned material as chunks and then break them down for analysis later on. For example, a learner may learn *I don't know* and *I don't understand* as chunks and then come to see that these are made up of *I don't + x* where *x* is a verb. Later they may see that it is possible to substitute the pronoun *I* with other pronouns such as *you* or *we*.

I don't know.  
I don't understand.  
I don't want \_\_\_\_.  
Can I have \_\_\_\_?  
What's your name?  
I'm very sorry.  
No thank you.  
How much does \_\_\_\_ cost?

Figure 1. Formulaic expressions in second language learning

Ultimately, however, learners need to develop knowledge of the rules that govern how language is used grammatically and appropriately. For example, they need to internalize rules for subject-verb agreement and for modifying terms of address to suit the person to whom they are speaking. Rules are generative and so enable learners to construct their own sentences to express their own ideas. They also enable them to use language creatively—for example, for purposes of irony and humor.

If formulaic chunks play a large role in early language acquisition, it may pay to focus on these initially, delaying the teaching of grammar until later. A notional-functional approach (Wilkins, 1976) lends itself perfectly to the teaching of formulaic sequences and may provide an ideal foundation for instruction in the early stages. Clearly, though, a complete language curriculum needs to cater to the development of both formulaic expressions and rule-based knowledge.

## Principle 2: Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning

When we learn a language naturalistically, we do so by focusing primarily on what we want to say (i.e., meaning) rather than on how we say it (i.e., form). Instruction needs to cater to this capacity for learning naturally by creating contexts in which learners focus on message content. A task-based approach to language teaching is perhaps the best way of achieving this. In this approach, no attempt is made to design lessons around specific linguistic teaching points. Instead, the teacher selects a series of communicative tasks designed to create learning opportunities of a general nature. In task-based teaching, teacher and students both function as communicators and view the second language as a tool for communicating rather than as an object to be analyzed and studied.

There are a number of reasons why learners need to focus on meaning:

- In the eyes of many theorists (e.g., Long, 1996; Prabhu, 1987), only when learners are engaged in decoding and encoding messages in the context of actual acts of communication are the conditions created for acquisition to take place.



- To develop true fluency in a second language, learners must have opportunities to engage in real communication (DeKeyser, 1998).
- Engaging in activities focused on creating meaning is intrinsically motivating for learners.

When learners focus on meaning, they develop both the skills needed for fluent communication and the vocabulary and grammar needed to use the language effectively.

**Principle 3: Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form**

There is now widespread acceptance that acquisition also requires learners to attend to form. Indeed, according to some theories of second language acquisition, such attention is necessary for acquisition to take place (Schmidt, 2001). Instruction can cater to a focus on form in a number of ways, as shown in Figure 2.

Teachers can achieve a focus on form

- through inductive or deductive grammar lessons. An inductive approach to grammar teaching is designed to encourage learners to notice pre-selected forms in the input to which they are exposed; a deductive approach seeks to make learners aware of the explicit grammatical rule.
- through communicative tasks designed to provide opportunities for learners to practice specific grammatical structures while focused primarily on meaning.
- through opportunities for learners to plan how they will perform a communicative task before they start it and/or by corrective feedback (i.e., drawing attention to learners' errors during or after the performance of a task).

Figure 2. Different ways of focusing on form in instruction

The term *focus on form* can mean different things. First, it might refer to a general orientation to language as form or to attending to specific forms (as argued by Schmidt, 2001). Second, it might be taken to suggest that learners need to attend only to the forms themselves and not to their meanings. However, theorists such as Schmidt insist that focus on form refers to form-function mapping—that is, the correlation between a particular form and the meaning(s) it realizes in communication. Third, focus on form might be assumed to refer to awareness of some underlying, abstract rule. Schmidt, however, claims that attention to form refers to the noticing of specific linguistic items as they occur in the input to which learners are exposed, not to an awareness of the underlying grammatical rules.

Instruction can seek to provide an intensive focus on linguistic forms as in grammar lessons based on a structural syllabus, or it can offer incidental and extensive attention to form through corrective feedback in task-based lessons. There are pros and cons for both

approaches. Grammar lessons may be needed to provide repeated practice for those structures that cause persistent problems. Incidental and extensive attention to form ensures that learners attend to a wide range of grammatical structures, many of which will not require intensive practice (i.e., they can be learned easily and quickly).

However, intensive instruction is time consuming and thus there will be constraints on how many structures can be addressed. In contrast, extensive grammar instruction, where the teacher corrects the errors that learners make as they make them, affords the opportunity for large numbers of grammatical structures to be addressed. In this way, many of the structures will be attended to repeatedly over a period of time. Further, because this kind of instruction involves a response to the errors each learner makes, it is individualized. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) reported that attention to form through extensive instruction occurred relatively frequently in communicative adult ESL lessons, while Loewen (2005) showed that learners who experienced this kind of instruction demonstrated subsequent learning.

**Principle 4: Instruction needs to focus on developing implicit knowledge of the second language while not neglecting explicit knowledge**

Implicit knowledge is procedural, is held unconsciously, and can be verbalized only if it is made explicit. It is accessed rapidly and easily and thus is available for use in rapid, fluent communication. In the view of most researchers, competence in a second language is primarily a matter of implicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is conscious and declarative and can be verbalized. It is typically accessed through controlled processing when learners experience some kind of linguistic difficulty in the use of the second language. Some language learners rely primarily on their explicit knowledge.

Given that implicit knowledge underlies the ability to communicate fluently and confidently in a second language, this type of knowledge should be the ultimate goal of any instructional program. How then can it be developed? There are conflicting theories regarding this. According to skill-building theory (DeKeyser, 1998), implicit knowledge arises out of explicit knowledge when the latter is automatized through practice. In contrast, emergentist theories (N. Ellis, 1998) see implicit knowledge as developing naturally out of meaning-focused communication—aided, perhaps, by some focus on form. Irrespective of these different theoretical positions, there is consensus that learners need to participate in communicative activity to develop implicit knowledge.

In order to make sense of the different positions relating to the teaching of explicit knowledge it is necessary to consider two separate questions:

- Is explicit knowledge of any value in and of itself?
- Is explicit knowledge of value in facilitating the development of implicit knowledge?

Explicit knowledge is arguably of value only if learners are able to utilize this type of knowledge in actual performance. Again, there is controversy. Krashen (1982) argues that learners can use explicit knowledge only when they “monitor” their language use and that this requires them to be focused on form (as opposed to meaning) and to have sufficient time to access their knowledge. However, it can also be argued that many learners are adroit in accessing their explicit knowledge while communicating (Kormos, 1999).

Whether or not explicit knowledge has any value in and of itself, it may assist language development by facilitating the development of implicit knowledge. This involves consideration of what has become known as *interface hypothesis*, which addresses whether explicit knowledge plays a role in second language acquisition. Three positions can be identified. According to the non-interface position (Krashen, 1981), explicit and implicit knowledge are entirely distinct, and explicit knowledge cannot be converted into implicit knowledge. The interface position (DeKeyser, 1998) argues that explicit knowledge can become implicit knowledge providing learners have the opportunity for plentiful communicative practice. The weak interface position (Ellis, 1993) claims that explicit knowledge makes it more likely that learners will attend to the structure in the input, which facilitates the processes involved in acquiring implicit knowledge.

The three positions support very different approaches to language teaching. The non-interface position leads to a *zero grammar* approach: that is, one that prioritizes meaning-centered approaches such as task-based teaching. The interface position supports *PPP*—the idea that a grammatical structure should be first *presented* explicitly and then *practiced* until it is fully *proceduralized* (i.e., automatized). The weak interface position has been used to provide a basis for consciousness-raising tasks. These are grammar discovery tasks that provide learners with data that they use to work out the grammar rule for themselves.

### **Principle 5: Instruction needs to take into account the learner’s built-in syllabus**

Early research into naturalistic second language acquisition showed that learners follow a natural order and sequence of acquisition. In other words, they master

grammatical structures in a relatively fixed and universal order, and they pass through a sequence of stages of acquisition en route to mastering each grammatical structure. This led researchers like Corder (1967) to suggest that learners had their own “built-in syllabus” for learning grammar as implicit knowledge. There followed a number of empirical studies designed to compare the order of acquisition of instructed and naturalistic learners (e.g., Pica, 1983), compare the success of instructed and naturalistic learners (Long, 1983), and examine whether attempts to teach specific grammatical structures resulted in their acquisition (Pienemann, 1989). These studies showed that, by and large, the order and sequence of acquisition were the same for instructed and naturalistic learners, that instructed learners generally achieved higher levels of grammatical competence than naturalistic learners, and that instruction was no guarantee that learners would acquire what they had been taught. This led to the conclusion that it is beneficial to teach grammar but that it must be taught in a way that is compatible with the natural processes of acquisition. Figure 3 suggests a number of ways in which this can be achieved.

- Adopt a zero grammar approach. That is, employ a task-based approach that makes no attempt to predetermine the linguistic content of a lesson.
- Ensure that learners are developmentally ready to acquire a specific target feature. However, this is probably impractical as teachers have no easy way of determining what individual students know. It would necessitate a highly individualized approach to cater to differences in developmental level among the students.
- Focus the instruction on explicit rather than implicit knowledge, as explicit knowledge is not subject to the same developmental constraints as implicit knowledge. That is, learners can learn facts about the grammar of a language in any order, but they will follow a definite sequence when mastering grammar for communicative use.

*Figure 3. Ways in which instruction can take account of the learner’s built-in syllabus*

### **Principle 6: Successful instructed language learning requires extensive second language input**

Language learning, whether it occurs in a naturalistic or an instructed context, is a slow and laborious process. Children acquiring their first language take between 2 and 5 years to achieve full grammatical competence (Wells, 1985), during which time they are exposed to massive amounts of input. The same is undoubtedly true of second language acquisition. If learners do not receive exposure to the target language, they cannot acquire it. Krashen (1985) has argued that all that is needed for successful acquisition is motivation and “comprehensible input”—input that is made easy

to understand either by simplifying it or by using contextual props. Other researchers, however, have argued that output is also important (see Principle 7 below), but they agree about the importance of input for developing the implicit knowledge that is needed to become an effective communicator in the second language.

How can teachers ensure their students have access to sufficient input? In a second language teaching context, most—although not all—learners can be expected to gain access to plentiful input outside the classroom. In a foreign language teaching context (as when French or Japanese is taught in the United States), there are far fewer opportunities for extensive input. Thus, to ensure adequate access, teachers need to maximize use of the second language inside the classroom. Ideally, this means that the second language needs to become the medium as well as the object of instruction. Teachers also need to create opportunities for students to obtain input outside the classroom. This can be achieved most easily by providing extensive reading programs based on carefully selected graded readers suited to the level of the students, as recommended by Krashen (1989). Also ideally, schools need to establish self-access centers (i.e., rooms containing carefully selected language learning materials that students can use on their own time). Successful foreign language learners seek out opportunities to experience the language outside class time, but many students are unlikely to make the effort unless teachers make resources available and provide learner training in how to make effective use of the resources. If the only input students receive is in the context of a limited number of weekly language lessons based on a course book, they are unlikely to achieve high levels of second language proficiency.

### **Principle 7: Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output**

Contrary to Krashen's insistence that acquisition is dependent entirely on comprehensible input, most researchers now acknowledge that learner output also plays a part in second language acquisition. Figure 4 summarizes the contributions that output can make.

The importance of creating opportunities for output, including what Swain (1985) has called "pushed output" (i.e., output where the learner is stretched to express messages clearly and explicitly), constitutes one of the main reasons for incorporating communicative tasks into a language program. Controlled practice exercises typically result in output that is limited in terms of length and complexity. They do not afford students opportunities for the kind of sustained output that theorists argue is necessary for second language development.

- Language production (output) serves to generate better input through the feedback elicited by learners' efforts at production.
- Output obliges learners to pay attention to grammar.
- Output allows learners to test hypotheses about the target language grammar.
- Output helps to automatize existing knowledge.
- Output provides opportunities for learners to develop discourse skills, for example, by producing long turns in conversation.
- Output helps learners develop a personal voice by steering conversation to topics to which they are interested in contributing.
- Output provides the learner with auto-input—that is, learners can attend to the input provided by their own language production.

(Based on Swain, 1985; Skehan, 1998; and Ellis, 2003)

Figure 4. The role of output in second language acquisition

### **Principle 8: The opportunity to interact in the second language is central to developing second language proficiency**

While it is useful to consider the relative contributions of input and output to acquisition, it is also important to acknowledge that both occur in oral interaction and that this plays a central role in second language acquisition. As Hatch (1978) famously put it, "One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of the interaction syntactic structures are developed" (p. 404). Thus, interaction is not just a means of automatizing what the learners already know but also about helping them to acquire new language.

According to the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), interaction fosters acquisition when a communication problem arises and learners are engaged in negotiating for meaning. The interactional modifications that arise help to make input comprehensible, provide corrective feedback, and push learners to modify their own output by repairing their own errors. According to sociocultural theory, interaction serves as a form of mediation, enabling learners to construct new forms and perform new functions collaboratively (Lantolf, 2000). According to this view, learning is first evident on the social plane and only later on the psychological plane. In both theories, social interaction is viewed as a primary source of learning.

Figure 5 identifies five key requirements for interaction to create an acquisition-rich classroom. Creating the right kind of interaction for acquisition constitutes a major challenge for teachers. One solution is to incorporate small group work into a lesson. When students interact among themselves, acquisition-rich discourse is more likely to ensue. However, there are also dangers in

group work (e.g., excessive use of the native language in monolingual groups) that teachers need to guard against.

- To create an acquisition-rich classroom, teachers need to
- create contexts of language use where students have a reason to attend to language,
  - allow students to initiate topics and to control topic development,
  - provide opportunities for learners to use the language to express their own personal meanings,
  - help students to participate in language-related activities that are beyond their current level of proficiency, and
  - offer a full range of contexts that provide opportunities for students to engage in a full performance in the language.

(Ellis, 1999; Johnson 1995)

Figure 5. Creating acquisition-rich interaction in the classroom

### Principle 9: Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners

While there are identifiable universal aspects of second language acquisition, there is also considerable variability in the rate of learning and in the ultimate level of achievement. In particular, learning will be more successful when the instruction is matched to students' particular aptitude for learning and when the students are motivated.

Teachers can cater to variation in the nature of their students' aptitude by adopting a flexible teaching approach involving a variety of learning activities. They can also make use of simple learner-training materials designed to make students more aware of their own approaches to learning and to develop awareness of alternative approaches. Studies of good language learners suggest that successful language learning requires a flexible approach to learning. Thus, increasing the range of learning strategies at learners' disposal is one way in which teachers can help them to learn. Such strategy training needs to foster an understanding that language learning requires both an experiential and an analytical approach. School-based students often tend to adopt an analytical approach to learning, even if this does not accord with their natural aptitude, as this is the kind of approach generally fostered in schools. They may have greater difficulty in adopting the kind of experiential approach required by task-based language teaching. Some learner training, therefore, may be essential if learners are to perform tasks effectively.

While it is probably true that teachers can do little to influence students' extrinsic motivation, there is a lot they can do to enhance their intrinsic motivation. Dornyei (2001) makes the obvious point that "the best motivational intervention is simply to improve the quality of our teaching" (p. 26). He points in particu-

lar to the need for "instructional clarity" by "explaining things simply" and "teaching at a pace that is not too fast and not too slow." Teachers also need to accept that it is their responsibility to ensure that their students stay motivated, and they should not complain that students do not bring any motivation to the classroom.

### Principle 10: In assessing learners' second language proficiency, it is important to examine free as well as controlled production

Norris and Ortega (2000) distinguished four types of measurement:

- Metalinguistic judgment (e.g., a grammaticality judgment test)
- Selected response (e.g., multiple choice)
- Constrained constructed response (e.g., gap-filling exercises)
- Free constructed response (e.g., a communicative task)

They found that the magnitude of the effect of instruction was greatest in the case of selected response and constrained constructed response, and least in free constructed response. Yet, arguably, free constructed response constitutes the best measure of learners' second language proficiency, as this corresponds most closely to the kind of language use found outside the classroom. The ability to get a multiple-choice question right amounts to very little if the student is unable to use the target feature in actual communication.

Free constructed responses are best elicited by means of tasks. Task-based performance can be assessed either by means of a direct assessment of task outcomes or by external ratings. The former is possible only with tasks that have a single correct outcome. An example would be a spot-the-difference task, where learners are asked to interact in order to find a specified number of differences in two similar pictures. In this task, assessment would consist of establishing whether the learners were able to identify the differences. External ratings involve assessing different qualities of a task performance such as accuracy, complexity, and fluency. Considerable expertise is required to ensure that the ratings are valid and reliable.

### Conclusion

These general principles have drawn on a variety of theoretical perspectives, although predominantly on what Lantolf (1996) refers to as the computational model of second language learning. This model has its limitations and is open to criticism, in particular that it is not socially sensitive because it fails to acknowledge the importance of social context and social relations in the language learning process. It would be clearly useful to attempt to formulate a set of principles based on the

broader conceptualization of second language acquisition—one that emphasizes the importance of the social as well as the cognitive aspects.

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In 2008, Professor Ellis was selected by CAL as the fourth Charles A. Ferguson Fellow. This fellowship was established in 1995 in honor of Charles A. Ferguson, CAL's founder and first director, to allow senior researchers in applied linguistics to affiliate with CAL as visiting scholars, contribute to ongoing work in their area of expertise, and further their own research and writing. While in residence at CAL from October through December 2008, Professor Ellis consulted on CAL projects in language learning and teaching and advised on directions for future work.

# Teaching Speaking: Activities to Promote Speaking in a Second Language

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## Introduction

Speaking is "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (Chaney, 1998, p. 13). Speaking is a crucial part of second language learning and teaching. Despite its importance, for many years, teaching speaking has been undervalued and English language teachers have continued to teach speaking just as a repetition of drills or memorization of dialogues. However, today's world requires that the goal of teaching speaking should improve students' communicative skills, because, only in that way, students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules appropriate in each communicative circumstance. In order to teach second language learners how to speak in the best way possible, some speaking activities are provided below, that can be applied to ESL and EFL classroom settings, together with suggestions for teachers who teach oral language.

## What Is "Teaching Speaking"?

What is meant by "teaching speaking" is to teach ESL learners to:

- Produce the English speech sounds and sound patterns
- Use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns and the rhythm of the second language.
- Select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter.
- Organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence.
- Use language as a means of expressing values and judgments.
- Use the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses, which is called as fluency. (Nunan, 2003)

## How To Teach Speaking

Now many linguistics and ESL teachers agree on that students learn to speak in the second language by "interacting". Communicative language teaching and collaborative learning serve best for this aim. Communicative language teaching is based on real-life situations that require communication. By using this method in ESL classes, students will have the opportunity of communicating with each other in the target language. In brief, ESL teachers should create a classroom environment where students have real-life communication, authentic activities, and meaningful tasks that promote oral language. This can occur when students collaborate in groups to achieve a goal or to complete a task.

## Activities To Promote Speaking

## **Discussions**

After a content-based lesson, a discussion can be held for various reasons. The students may aim to arrive at a conclusion, share ideas about an event, or find solutions in their discussion groups. Before the discussion, it is essential that the purpose of the discussion activity is set by the teacher. In this way, the discussion points are relevant to this purpose, so that students do not spend their time chatting with each other about irrelevant things. For example, students can become involved in agree/disagree discussions. In this type of discussions, the teacher can form groups of students, preferably 4 or 5 in each group, and provide controversial sentences like “people learn best when they read vs. people learn best when they travel”. Then each group works on their topic for a given time period, and presents their opinions to the class. It is essential that the speaking should be equally divided among group members. At the end, the class decides on the winning group who defended the idea in the best way. This activity fosters critical thinking and quick decision making, and students learn how to express and justify themselves in polite ways while disagreeing with the others. For efficient group discussions, it is always better not to form large groups, because quiet students may avoid contributing in large groups. The group members can be either assigned by the teacher or the students may determine it by themselves, but groups should be rearranged in every discussion activity so that students can work with various people and learn to be open to different ideas. Lastly, in class or group discussions, whatever the aim is, the students should always be encouraged to ask questions, paraphrase ideas, express support, check for clarification, and so on.

## **Role Play**

One other way of getting students to speak is role-playing. Students pretend they are in various social contexts and have a variety of social roles. In role-play activities, the teacher gives information to the learners such as who they are and what they think or feel. Thus, the teacher can tell the student that "You are David, you go to the doctor and tell him what happened last night, and..." (Harmer, 1984)

## **Simulations**

Simulations are very similar to role-plays but what makes simulations different than role plays is that they are more elaborate. In simulations, students can bring items to the class to create a realistic environment. For instance, if a student is acting as a singer, she brings a microphone to sing and so on. Role plays and simulations have many advantages. First, since they are entertaining, they motivate the students. Second, as Harmer (1984) suggests, they increase the self-confidence of hesitant students, because in role play and simulation activities, they will have a different role and do not have to speak for themselves, which means they do not have to take the same responsibility.

## **Information Gap**

In this activity, students are supposed to be working in pairs. One student will have the information that other partner does not have and the partners will share their information. Information gap activities serve many purposes such as solving a problem or collecting information. Also, each partner plays an important role because the task cannot be completed if the partners do not provide the information the others need. These activities are effective because everybody has the opportunity to talk extensively in the target language.

## **Brainstorming**

On a given topic, students can produce ideas in a limited time. Depending on the context, either individual or group brainstorming is effective and learners generate ideas quickly and freely. The good characteristics of brainstorming is that the students are not criticized for their ideas so students will be open to sharing new ideas.

## **Storytelling**

Students can briefly summarize a tale or story they heard from somebody beforehand, or they may create their own stories to tell their classmates. Story telling fosters creative thinking. It also helps students express ideas in the format of beginning, development, and ending, including the characters and setting a story has to have. Students also can tell riddles or jokes. For instance, at the very beginning of each class session, the teacher may call a few students to tell short riddles or jokes as an opening. In this way, not only will the teacher address students' speaking ability, but also get the attention of the class.

## **Interviews**

Students can conduct interviews on selected topics with various people. It is a good idea that the teacher provides a rubric to students so that they know what type of questions they can ask or what path to follow, but students should prepare their own interview questions. Conducting interviews with people gives students a chance to practice their speaking ability not only in class but also outside and helps them becoming socialized. After interviews, each student can present his or her study to the class. Moreover, students can interview each other and "introduce" his or her partner to the class.

## **Story Completion**

This is a very enjoyable, whole-class, free-speaking activity for which students sit in a circle. For this activity, a teacher starts to tell a story, but after a few sentences he or she stops narrating. Then, each student starts to narrate from the point where the previous one stopped. Each student is supposed to add from four to ten sentences. Students can add new characters, events, descriptions and so on.

## **Reporting**

Before coming to class, students are asked to read a newspaper or magazine and, in class, they report to their friends what they find as the most interesting news. Students can also talk about whether they have experienced anything worth telling their friends in their daily lives before class.

## **Playing Cards**

In this game, students should form groups of four. Each suit will represent a topic. For instance:

- **Diamonds:** Earning money
- **Hearts:** Love and relationships
- **Spades:** An unforgettable memory
- **Clubs:** Best teacher



Each student in a group will choose a card. Then, each student will write 4-5 questions about that topic to ask the other people in the group. For example:

If the topic "Diamonds: Earning Money" is selected, here are some possible questions:

- Is money important in your life? Why?
- What is the easiest way of earning money?
- What do you think about lottery? Etc.

However, the teacher should state at the very beginning of the activity that students are not allowed to prepare yes-no questions, because by saying yes or no students get little practice in spoken language production. Rather, students ask open-ended questions to each other so that they reply in complete sentences.

### **Picture Narrating**

This activity is based on several sequential pictures. Students are asked to tell the story taking place in the sequential pictures by paying attention to the criteria provided by the teacher as a rubric. Rubrics can include the vocabulary or structures they need to use while narrating.

### **Picture Describing**

Another way to make use of pictures in a speaking activity is to give students just one picture and having them describe what it is in the picture. For this activity students can form groups and each group is given a different picture. Students discuss the picture with their groups, then a spokesperson for each group describes the picture to the whole class. This activity fosters the creativity and imagination of the learners as well as their public speaking skills.

### **Find the Difference**

For this activity students can work in pairs and each couple is given two different pictures, for example, picture of boys playing football and another picture of girls playing tennis. Students in pairs discuss the similarities and/or differences in the pictures.

## **Suggestions For Teachers in Teaching Speaking**

Here are some suggestions for English language teachers while teaching oral language:

- Provide maximum opportunity to students to speak the target language by providing a rich environment that contains collaborative work, authentic materials and tasks, and shared knowledge.
- Try to involve each student in every speaking activity; for this aim, practice different ways of student participation.
- Reduce teacher speaking time in class while increasing student speaking time. Step back and observe students.

- Indicate positive signs when commenting on a student's response.
- Ask eliciting questions such as "What do you mean? How did you reach that conclusion?" in order to prompt students to speak more.
- Provide written feedback like "Your presentation was really great. It was a good job. I really appreciated your efforts in preparing the materials and efficient use of your voice..."
- Do not correct students' pronunciation mistakes very often while they are speaking. Correction should not distract student from his or her speech.
- Involve speaking activities not only in class but also out of class; contact parents and other people who can help.
- Circulate around classroom to ensure that students are on the right track and see whether they need your help while they work in groups or pairs.
- Provide the vocabulary beforehand that students need in speaking activities.
- Diagnose problems faced by students who have difficulty in expressing themselves in the target language and provide more opportunities to practice the spoken language.

## Conclusion

Teaching speaking is a very important part of second language learning. The ability to communicate in a second language clearly and efficiently contributes to the success of the learner in school and success later in every phase of life. Therefore, it is essential that language teachers pay great attention to teaching speaking. Rather than leading students to pure memorization, providing a rich environment where meaningful communication takes place is desired. With this aim, various speaking activities such as those listed above can contribute a great deal to students in developing basic interactive skills necessary for life. These activities make students more active in the learning process and at the same time make their learning more meaningful and fun for them.

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