LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORY

Language Acquisition Theory implies that language acquisition occurs only when comprehension of real messages occurs and when the acquirer is not "on the defensive." It does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules or tedious drill. It does not occur overnight, however. Real language acquisition develops slowly and speaking skills emerge significantly later than listening skills, even when conditions are perfect.

The best methods of language acquisition supply "comprehensible input" in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods allow students to speak the language when they are "ready" and recognize that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input––not from forcing and correcting grammatical errors.

Language acquisition is how we develop the ability to speak our first language. It is a subconscious process; acquirers are not aware of the rules the language initially. They are only aware that they are using language for communication. They have a "feel" for correctness. Grammatical sentences "sound" or "feel" right, and errors feel wrong.

Acquisition is responsible for fluency. Learning (conscious reference to grammatical rules) has only one function: to monitor or edit our speech. The Monitor may be used before, during, or after an utterance, but exists only to make corrections to language that has already been acquired.

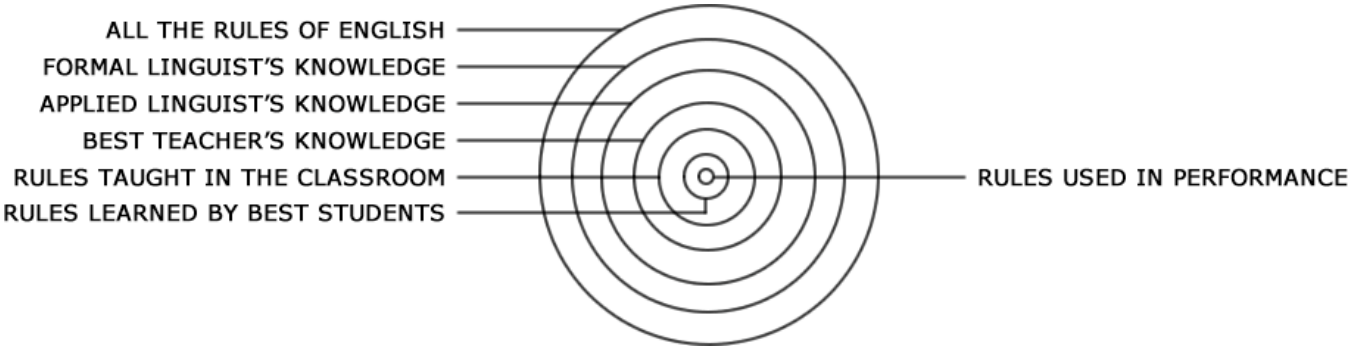
LEARNING NEED NOT PRECEDE ACQUISITION

Language Acquisition Theory asserts that learning does not need to precede acquisition. There are very good reasons for maintaining this position that emerge from observing second language performers.

First, we often see acquisition in cases where learning never occurred. There are many performers who can use complex structures in a second language who do not consciously know the corresponding grammatical rules.

Second, we also see learning that never becomes acquisition. Many performers who have conscious learned rules, still fail to use them and make what they call "careless" errors--even simple or linguistically straightforward rules.

Third, even the best learners master only a small subset of a language's rules. See the diagrams below, which compare the knowledge of English grammar as a whole to various of its users:



People acquire language in a fairly predictable natural order which occurs when we receive comprehensible input. Occasionally, we learn certain rules before we acquire them, and this gives us the illusion that the learning actually caused the acquisition. Professional language teachers, fascinated by the structure of language and inspired by the pleasure they derive from the mastery and use of conscious rules, are often not even aware that acquisition without prior conscious learning is possible.

This was my unexamined assumption as well. The procedure described earlier seemed right and reasonable to me at one time: language learning, in the general sense, occurred when one first consciously grasped a rule, then practiced it again and again until it was "automatic". This is actually deductive learning; there is another possibility, namely, "inductive" learning.

Learning sometimes precedes acquisition in real time: a rule that is eventually acquired may have been "learned" (received through teaching) first. By no means does this establish the necessity of prior learning for acquisition, however. Just because event A preceded event B does not demonstrate that A caused B.

Many students (but probably fewer than most of us think) are interested in the study of the structure of language *per se.* They may also be interested in language change, dialects, etc. Most satisfying, for some students, is learning what has already been acquired--the "Eureka phenomenon." This may be used to motivate students to continue their acquisition of the language.

MONITORING LANGUAGE

Research strongly suggests that second language performers can use conscious rules only when three conditions are met:

1) *Time*. In order to think about and use conscious rules effectively, a second language performer needs sufficient time. For most people, normal conversation does not allow this.

2) *Focus on form (correctness)*. Even when we have time, we may be so involved in what we are saying that we fail to observe the rules.

3) *Knowing the rule*. The structure of language is vast and complex. Even the best students do not learn every rule they are exposed to.

Even effective Monitors do a better job with syntactically simple rules––those that do not require elaborate rearranging. Rules can be very difficult due to their semantic properties. Use of the English article is easy to describe formally--one simply inserts *the* or *a* or sometimes nothing before the noun. But its semantics are very difficult to describe.

Monitor Over-users attempt to Monitor all the time and constantly check their output. As a result, they may speak hesitantly, often interrupt their own speech and thoughts, and are so concerned with correctness that they cannot speak with great fluency.

Victims of grammar-only instruction have not had the chance to acquire much of the language and may depend on learning. Other Monitor Over-users may have acquired a great deal, but do not trust their acquired competence; they only feel secure when they check, "just to be sure".

Optimal Monitor users use the Monitor when appropriate and when it does not interfere with communication.

Some very skilled performers, professional linguists and language teachers, may use considerable amounts of conscious knowledge in conversation, but this is very unusual. These people are "Super Monitor users."

Monitor Under-users have not learned or prefer not to use their conscious knowledge, even when conditions allow it. Under-users do not care to correct errors or believe that their "feel" for correctness is enough.

ACQUISITION: FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

Let us first restate the question of how we acquire: how do we move from one stage to another? How do we move from stage *i*, which represents current competence, to *i + 1?* We must focus on the *meaning* and not the form of the message.

We acquire, in other words, only when we understand language that contains structure "a little beyond" where we are now. How is this possible? The answer: we use more than our linguistic competence––we also use context, knowledge of the world, and extra-linguistic information.

The input hypothesis contradicts the usual pedagogical approach. We have always assumed that we must learn structures first, then practice using them in communication to develop fluency. The input hypothesis says that we acquire by "going for meaning" first… the structure follows. To be clear: acquisition and learning are two different things.

Input must contain *i + 1* to be useful for language acquisition, but it is not limited to that. If the acquirer understands the input and there is enough of it, *i + 1* is automatically provided. This implies that the best input should not deliberately aim at *i + 1*. The "structure of the day", explaining or practicing a specific grammatical item, is not necessary and may even retard acquisition.

In conclusion, speaking fluency cannot be taught directly; it "emerges" over time, on its own. The only way to teach speaking, therefore, is to provide comprehensible input. Early speech comes "when the time is right" for the student, and varies from person to person. Early speech is often grammatically incorrect, but accuracy develops over time as the acquirer hears and understands more input, so there is no need to worry about consciously introducing structure.

This is a good thing! Adding the responsibility of grammatical sequencing to parenthood, for example, would make parent-child communication much less spontaneous and far more difficult. A grammatical syllabus is ineffective in fostering language acquisition because:

1) all students are not at the same stage. The "structure of the day" may not be *i + 1* for many of the students. With natural communicative input, on the other hand, some *i + 1* or other will be provided for everyone.

2) each structure is usually just presented once. If a student misses the lesson or needs more practice (input), he may have to wait until the next year! Roughly-tuned comprehensible input allows for natural review, however.

3) it assumes a certain natural order of acquisition. No such assumption is necessary when we rely on comprehensible input.

4) it places serious constraints on what can be discussed. Too often, it is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss or read anything of real interest if our underlying motive is to practice a particular structure.

We should not attempt to teach along the natural order, or any other order, when our goal is acquisition rather than conscious learning.

THE AFFECTIVE FILTER HYPOTHESIS

Research has confirmed that a variety of affective variables relate to success in second language acquisition and falls into one of three categories:

1) *Motivation.* Performers with high motivation generally do better in second language acquisition.

2) *Self-confidence.* Performers with self-confidence and a good self-image tend to do better in second language acquisition.

3) *Anxiety.* Low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety.

The Affective Filter hypothesis posits that acquisition varies with respect to the strength or level of students' Affective Filters.

Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition have a high or strong Affective Filter and seek less input. Even when they understand the message, the input will not reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the language acquisition device.

THE CAUSATIVE VARIABLES

Language acquisition theory thus far can be summarized as follows:

1. Acquisition is more important than learning.

2. In order to acquire, two conditions are necessary. The first is comprehensible input with structures a bit beyond the acquirer's current level (*i + 1*), and second, a low or weak affective filter.

In other words, we may see positive correlations between other variables and measures of achievement in second language, but comprehensible input and filter strength are the true causes of all language acquisition.

LANGUAGE TEACHING

If acquisition is more central, and learning of less use to second language performance, and if comprehensible input and the filter are the essential causative variables for second language acquisition, the classroom should help only to the extent it supplies comprehensible input in an environment conducive to a low filter. This should be, then, the classroom's main function.

The classroom should be especially valuable for beginners, those who cannot easily utilize the informal environment ("real world") for input. It will be of less value to those who already have access to other sources of comprehensible input, and who are linguistically advanced enough to take advantage of it.

AGE

It has been popularly assumed that age itself is a predictor of second language proficiency, that younger students are better at second language acquisition than older students. It can be argued, however, that the quantity of comprehensible input and the level of the affective filter is a greater determinant. All published studies are consistent with these three generalizations:

1. Adults proceed through the early stages of second language development faster than children do (given the same amount of time and exposure).

2. Older children acquire faster than younger children (under the same conditions).

3. Acquirers who begin natural exposure to second languages during childhood generally achieve higher second language proficiency than those beginning as adults.

It is simply not the case that "younger is better." Young students are superior to adults only in the long run.

ACCULTURATION

Schumann has hypothesized that acculturation is the "major casual variable in second language acquisition" and maintains that "second language acquisition is just one aspect of acculturation, and the degree to which the learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the target language." In other words, acculturation can be viewed as a means of gaining comprehensible input and lowering the filter.

The Heidelberg project, mentioned earlier, studied variables correlating with successful acquisition of German by foreign workers. Reported amounts of leisure contact with speakers of German correlated with syntactic performance ($r = 0.64$) as did amount of work contact ($r = 0.55$). Apparently, either form of interaction was effective in encouraging second language acquisition.

Schumann, in reporting the Heidelberg research, also notes that "learners whose work required communication with co-workers did better in German than workers who provided services (hairdressers, kitchen help, etc.)" Also, "learners who worked in an environment that was noisy or which constrained movement were at a disadvantage".

Acculturation may also "motivate" second language acquisition. As the individual acquirer acculturates into a culture, he obtains more input via more interaction, and is more "open" to it. However, input can be obtained with acculturation, and there are many techniques for bringing down the filter that have nothing to do with acculturation. In situations where there is some urgency in second language acquisition but less desire to integrate, for example, "instrumental" motivation, the desire to use the language for practical means, may predict success better.

Stevick provides a poignant example, a story related to him by one of his students:

"Four years ago I was looking for any kind of job I could find. I happened to get one teaching ESL to a class of six women from various parts of the world who spoke no English. I had never heard of ESL before. The salary was poor and I didn't know if I wanted to pursue a teaching career, therefore my approach was very casual and low pressure. My method usually consisted of thinking up a topic to talk about, introducing it, and encouraging each student to express her feelings.

In spite of my casual approach, the teaching job was extremely pleasant. I had a deep empathy for anyone who was facing a language barrier because I had just returned from a trip around the world alone as a monolingual.

"They all started speaking English fairly well after the first two weeks of class. I remember a woman from Columbia telling me that she hadn't spoken English before because she was afraid of making mistakes. After being in class for a while, she spoke English and made mistakes and didn't care. I didn't attach much significance to the progress that the women made. I had no idea how long it took people to learn a language.

"Gradually I became quite career-oriented, and made a conscious decision to try to be a top-notch ESL teacher. I had guilt feelings about the casual way in which I had taught those first six women, and my teaching evolved into the traditional authoritarian style with the textbook dominant. Over the years, it has gotten to where I feel frustrated if a student takes class time to relate a personal anecdote.

"I can look back on these four years and see a gradual decline in the performance of my students. Until recently, I have been assuming that I needed to be more attentive to their mistakes in order to speed their progress. My present style of teaching bypasses the students; feelings and basic needs, and concentrates on method. I never see successes like those first six ladies."

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL DISTANCE

Psychological distance is determined by factors such as motivation, language and culture shock, and other affective variables. Social distance results from social factors, such as the relative dominance of the social group of the acquirer and speakers of the target language, the cohesiveness of the groups, similarity in culture, etc. In Schumann's view, factors causing psychological and social distance "put the learner in a situation where he is largely cut off from target language input and/or does not attend to it when it is available."

POTENTIAL OF THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

We often hear that you have to "live in the country" in order to achieve any real proficiency--that the informal real world environment is always superior to the classroom, or formal environment. There are several studies that support this assertion. When acquirers have rich sources of input outside the class, and when they are proficient enough to take advantage of it, they may find the classroom uninteresting or redundant.

All second language classes are transitional, and no second language class can be expected to do the entire job. There is really no way the classroom can provide the variety of second language use necessary for real competence in a second language, no matter how varied the presentation, no matter how many different situations are used in role-playing activities. There is also no way the classroom can provide the quantity of input required for truly advanced competence in a second language.

These are not real problems when we consider the proper function of the classroom. If students can transition to the "real" world, they can begin to use it for comprehensible input, where both quantity and variety is readily available.

That said, some studies suggest that the classroom can help. Comprehensible input is really what is at issue, here.

The classroom can help to achieve at least the intermediate levels rapidly, as long as the focus is on providing input for acquisition. If we fill our second language classrooms with input that is optimal for acquisition, it is quite possible that we can do even better than the informal environment, at least up to the intermediate level.

The informal environment is not always willing to supply comprehensible input to the older second language student. Input to the adult is more complicated grammatically, contains a wider range of vocabulary, deals with more complex topics, and is generally harder to understand. This is simply a reflection of the fact that the adult world is more complex than the world of the child, and expectations for adult comprehension are much higher.

Despite my enthusiasm for the second language classroom, the outside world clearly excels, especially for the intermediate level second language student. Living in the country where the language is spoken can result in an all-day second language lesson! Unfortunately, a student has to "get there", somehow, before it is useful at all.

Although the range of discourse that the student can be exposed to in a second language classroom is limited--no matter how "natural" we make it--we can certainly improve it. The classroom can supply adequate input to help students understand "real" language and make them conversationally competent by providing tools to manage "real" conversations.

THE ROLE OF OUTPUT

The Input Hypothesis claims that we acquire spoken fluency *not* by practicing talking but by understanding input--listening and reading. It is possible to acquire language without ever talking, however.

Lenneberg described the case of a boy with congenital dysarthria, a disorder of the peripheral speech organs, who was never able to speak. He found, despite the boy's disability, that he was able to understand spoken English perfectly. The child had acquired "competence" without ever producing! There is no way to tell directly whether his lack of output slowed his language acquisition; if he had been able to speak, he may have acquired language faster, due to the indirect contribution speaking can make to acquisition.

Though we acquire only via input, output can indirectly assist acquisition when it leads us to more sources of input. Simply put, the more you talk, the more people will talk to you! This also affects the quality of the input directed at the acquirer. Conversational partners often try to help you understand by modifying their speech ("foreigner talk"). They determine how much to modify by testing your understanding and by listening to you talk.

The second language acquirer also has some degree of control of the topic, can signal to the partner that there is a comprehension problem, etc. In other words, he can manage and regulate the input, and make it more comprehensible. There is no such control in merely eavesdropping! In order to participate in conversation, there must be at least some talk, some output, from each partner. Hence, the indirect contribution of speech.

CHARACTERISTICS OF OPTIMAL INPUT

This section presents a set of rules or requirements to be met by any activity or materials aimed at subconscious language acquisition.

A. OPTIMAL INPUT IS COMPREHENSIBLE

This is clearly the most important characteristic. When the acquirer does not understand the message, there will be no acquisition, period. Incomprehensible input, or "noise", will not help.

"Just talking" or "free conversation" is not language teaching. Simply being a native speaker of a language does not qualify one as a teacher of that language. Conscious and extensive knowledge of grammar does not, either. The defining characteristic of a good teacher is someone who can make input comprehensible to a non-native speaker, regardless of their level of competence in the target language.

Teachers may use linguistic and non-linguistic means to make their speech more comprehensible. Linguistic approaches that aid comprehension include:

1) slower rate and clearer articulation, which helps acquirers to identify word boundaries more easily, and allows more processing time;

2) more use of high frequency vocabulary, less slang, and fewer idioms;

3) syntactical simplification and shorter sentences.

Consciously referring to these "rules" might be helpful on occasion, but it appears that we make these adjustments automatically when we simply focus on trying to make ourselves understood. As Roger Brown, says of caretaker speech in first language acquisition, "Believe that your child can understand more than he or she can say, and seek, above all, to communicate. There is no set of rules of how to talk to a child that can even approach what you unconsciously know. If you concentrate on communicating, everything else will follow.

Another main task of the teacher is to provide non-linguistic means of encouraging comprehension. Extra-linguistic support in the form of realia and pictures for beginning classes is not a frill, but a very important part of the tools needed to encourage language acquisition. These help the acquirer understand messages containing structures that are "a little beyond" them, or at their $i + 1$. Teachers can also take advantage of students knowledge of the world by discussing topics that are familiar to them.

There is danger, however, in making the input too familiar. If the message is completely known, it will be of no interest, and the student will probably not attend. We want the student to focus on the message, and there must be some message, something that the student really wants to hear or read about. This requirement is perhaps the hardest one to meet.

B. OPTIMAL INPUT IS INTERESTING AND RELEVANT

Optimal input focusses the acquirer on the message and not on form. To go a step further, the best input is so interesting and relevant that the acquirer may even "forget" that the message is encoded in a foreign language.

C. OPTIMAL INPUT IS NOT GRAMMATICALLY SEQUENCED

In acquisition-oriented materials, we should not be consciously concerned about including *i + 1* in the input. As long as input is comprehensible (meaning is successfully negotiated) *i + 1* will be present automatically, in most cases.

Unsequenced but natural input will contain a rich variety of structure and there will be *i + 1* for everyone as long as there is an adequate amount of input.

When we attempt to present a "finely-tuned" sequence, we generally present each structure or rule once. There are review lessons and other attempts at recycling, but review does not usually work through the entire sequence of activities--its goal is generally to "remind" and provide additional practice for a rule that is supposedly already "internalized".

What happens to the student who misses the rule the first time around? A reminder will probably not help. In traditional foreign language learning, as done in the United States, the student may even have to wait until next year, when the rule is presented again!

Unsequenced communicative input contains built-in review. We don't have to worry if we miss the progressive tense today, it will be part of the input again and again, assuming there is enough of it.

D. OPTIMAL INPUT MUST BE IN SUFFICIENT QUANTITY

It is difficult to say just how much comprehensible/low filter input is necessary to achieve a given level of proficiency in second language acquisition, due to a lack of data. We know enough now, however, to be able to state with confidence that the profession has seriously underestimated the amount of comprehensible input necessary to achieve even moderate levels of proficiency in language acquisition.

Five minutes of talk or a single paragraph of reading have little chance of including a given student's *i + 1*. Rather than take a more careful aim at that student's needs, rather than "overindividualizing" instruction, it is far easier to increase the amount of comprehensible input.

OTHER WAYS TO ENCOURAGE ACQUISITION

1. Students should never be put on the defensive.

To assure that the student is "open" to input, we must keep the affective filter "low". We should not insist on production too early, before the student is "ready".

Language teachers (and students) associate progress in second language acquisition with speaking fluency ("Do you *speak* French?"), and the logical consequence of this is that we want our students to talk from the beginning. Expecting the student to speak before building up enough competence through comprehensible input is perhaps the single most anxiety-provoking thing about language classes!

While some students may want to talk as soon as possible, others do not. Allowing a "silent period" lowers affective filters. The safest practice is not to force production at all and let the student decide when to start talking.

A look at some of the memorized sentences and phrases children pick up during the silent period confirms their utility in a variety of social situations. Quite often, however, the children do not immediately understand exactly when and how to use them, so we must be patient. A particularly vivid example is the child, who had been in the United States approximately two months, who greeted an acquaintance of mine with "I kick you ass."

Correcting errors is guaranteed to create anxiety and raise the affective filter, especially in beginning stages and especially in spoken language! Error correction is, unfortunately, the profession's typical reaction and a serious mistake. Again, a safe practice is to eliminate error correction entirely in communicative-type activities, a procedure used with great success in Terrell's Natural Approach. Improvement will come without error correction, and may even come more rapidly, since the input will "get in", the filter will be lower, and students will be off the defensive.

2. Teachers should provide tools to help students obtain more input.

We must provide students with the tools they need to continue improving outside the classroom, to have the linguistic competence necessary to begin to take advantage of the informal environment, the "real" world. In other words, they need to know enough of the second language so they can understand significant portions of non-classroom language. They need to be conversationally competent.

By giving students the means to managing conversations, we give them access to outside conversation despite their inadequacies. We should prepare them for the certainty that they will often not be able to find the right word or understand everything, but they can continue to obtain comprehensible input on their own.

Components of conversational competence include ways of starting conversations (greetings) and ways to keep them going (e.g. politeness formulae). There are various techniques to make input more comprehensible, to control the quality of the input. Perhaps the most obvious is to express one's lack of understanding, ask the native speaker for help, or prompt him to provide contextual clues using "discourse devices".

One example of a discourse device is to focus on a single "problem word" by repeating it, as illustrated below:

Native speaker:	Salvador Dali also put out a cookbook because he is a great expert on cuisine.
Student:	(looking confused): Cookbook?
Native speaker:	(lifting cookbook) Recipes from Maxime's, places like that.

The quality of input can be improved by the use of "back channel cues" that let the native speaker know his conversational partner is following along, like "uh-uh", "yeah" or non-verbal cues like nodding the head at appropriate times and eye gaze behavior.

Finally, there are conversational strategies that avoid incomprehensible input, including ways of changing the subject to something easier or more familiar. For example:

Native speaker:	I like classical music, too--Beethoven, Schubert--you know, that kinda stuff.
Student 1:	You play the piano?
Student 2:	Yeah.
Student 1:	Me too.

A small sub-set of conversational management tools like the ones described above can be directly taught as rules or memorized routines, as long as they are easy to learn.

BEST CONDITIONS FOR ACQUISITION AND LEARNING

Requirements for optimal input:

1. Comprehensible
2. Interesting/relevant
3. Not grammatically sequenced
4. Quantity
5. Filter level ("off the defensive")
6. Tools for conversational management

Learning should be restricted to:

1. Certain rules; those that are
    a. Learnable
    b. Portable
    c. Not yet acquired
2. Certain people ("Monitor users")
3. Certain situations
    a. time
    b. focus on form

TESTING IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE

There are a wide variety of tests available to teachers and administrators, today. Tests are usually classified by the modality they use (reading, writing, speaking, listening) and their place among the discrete point/integrative continuum. Discrete-point tests attempt "to focus attention on one point of grammar at a time." An extreme discrete point test requires a minimum of knowledge of context outside the sentence containing the item tested. For example:

Mary _____ in New York since 1960.

a. is living
b. has lived
c. lives

Integrative tests, on the other hand, make no attempt to focus on one aspect of language at a time. Instead, they "attempt to assess a learner's capacity to use many bits all at the same time, and possibly while exercising several presumed components of a grammatical system, and perhaps more than one of the traditionally-recognized skills or aspects of skills." Examples of integrative tests include reading comprehension, cloze tests, dictation, compositions, and tests of oral communication.

11For the foreign language class, I see only two options. One of them is fairly traditional: reading comprehension. If students know in advance that they will be given a reading comprehension test in which they must read short passages and answer general questions about the content, they will be encouraged to study for the test in the simplest and most obvious way: reading in the second language.

As long as they know they will have variety (different topics) and that the questions will focus on the "gist" of the passages rather than specific words or structures, it follows that general reading for pleasure and interest will prepare them for such a test. Teachers can provide comprehensible reading materials that fit the bill and students will look outside the classroom for supplementary materials and opportunities to read. By so doing, they will acquire more of the target language.

There is a second, more complicated option for testing in foreign language: a test that encourages students to engage in conversations and requires use of the tools of communicative competence. Many standard oral tests fail to do this. A test in which the student answers questions does not require interactional ability, nor does a test in which a student simply talks or even asks questions. What is needed is a true test of conversational management.

A test of this type would involve both tester and student in a conversation about something real, a problem that has to be solved, a topic that needs to be discussed. The student would be rated on his ability to manage the conversation and communicate, not on grammatical accuracy.

If the student had word-finding difficulties resulting in an embarrassed silence, he would be graded down. If he was able to "cover" the problem with appropriate fillers (just a moment, what I mean is, how do you say) he would be graded up for keeping the conversation "alive". Students would also receive credit for politeness and appropriateness, since this is necessary for successful conversation. They would also earn credit for successfully communicating and completing exchanges. Students who were able to get the examiner to help them would also be graded more highly, on the assumption that those who can elicit more comprehensible input from others will acquire more in the long run.

There are predictable objections to such a testing plan. Some may argue that such tests do nothing for the development of grammatical accuracy and only encourage sloppy speech, a laissez-faire, "anything goes" attitude toward language, and the establishment of permanent bad habits. Language Acquisition Theory makes quite different predictions, however. If tests encourage students to engage in speaking and further develop communicative skills, they actually help development of grammatical accuracy--more than any other test would! They offer students the tools needed to continue acquiring the second language well after the course ends.

Reading comprehension and conversational management are not only the most appropriate for achievement tests given at the end of the semester, but may also be the most appropriate leaving exams. The tests ask only these questions: can the student read well enough in the second language so that he can read texts without having to consult a dictionary excessively and without undue inconvenience--what Newmark calls "crytoanalytic decoding"? Is he able to communicate effectively with a native speaker who is willing to help?

MATERIALS

Materials should help students acquire language. They should either supply comprehensible input (interesting, relevant, and not grammatically sequenced) or they should provide students with the means of obtaining it. Materials for learning (vs. acquisition) should focus on rules that are learnable, portable, etc.

One obvious and convenient source of comprehensible input is reading. As discussed earlier in this chapter, pleasure reading meets the requirements to qualify as input for acquisition very well. Unfortunately, many readers designed for second language students do not meet these requirements. The reading is often incomprehensible, almost always grammatically sequenced, limited to syntax the student is supposed to have studied or is currently learning, and not available in sufficient quantity.

The assumption underlying many of the exercises in readers is that students must "review" and "practice" new vocabulary and grammar or they will not retain it. With excessive exercises, however, we may destroy our students' desire to read for pleasure and interest in the second language, ensuring that many will never see the new structures and words again.

There is an alternative approach to developing and field testing readers, consistent with Language Acquisition Theory. The first step is to use writers who are genuinely interested in telling a story and are sympathetic with the audience. They simply write, focussing on the story, using what they intuitively feel they need to tell it in a comprehensible way. The field test is not a syntactic analysis. It only attempts to answer these questions: do members of the intended audience understand it? Do they enjoy it? Do they find it interesting? Would they read it on their own, unassigned? If so, *i + 1* will be there and the reading suits our purpose.

We may apply similar criteria to other kinds of materials, i.e. the lab materials recommended earlier, and materials designed to help teach subject matter. Ultimately, the language acquirers will answer these questions for us, by using the materials or ignoring them.

ACCEPTING THE THEORY: THE GREATEST AFFECTIVE FILTER

There are some serious problems that need to be mentioned before concluding. Teachers and students must accept language acquisition as primary, and comprehensible input as the means of encouraging it. They must understand that acquisition is slow and subtle, while learning is appears fast and obvious.

Acquisition takes time, even years. Good linguists, on the other hand, can consciously learn a lot in a very short time. Also, when we acquire language, we are hardly aware of it--it feels like it was always there. Learning is different. Some people derive pleasure from learning and use of conscious rules--but this is not real language acquisition.

Language curriculum and texts are designed by people who learn quickly and who derive satisfaction from it. The vast majority of our students are not as interested in language structure, however. Some students who have "bought into" the notion that learning is the only way, will only accept conscious grammar and drill as the core of a language class, and who expect all of their errors to be corrected. If Language Acquisition Theory is correct, in the long term, these students will get what they need.

One short-term solution to resistance is to present a short course on Language Acquisition Theory as part of the language program. Another is to teach situationally, providing short, useful dialogues that satisfy the student's craving for formal learning and memorized language, but, at the same time, present comprehensible input. Subject matter-oriented classes will also provide comprehensible input for a student, whether he believes in subconscious acquisition or not.

THE NATURAL METHOD OF "INSTRUCTION"

Methods.

1. Class time is devoted primarily to providing input for acquisition.

2. The teacher speaks only the target language in the classroom. Students may use either the first or second language. If they choose to respond in the second language, their errors are not corrected unless communication is seriously impaired.

3. Homework may include formal grammar work. Error correction is employed in correcting homework.

4. The goals of the course are "semantic"; activities may involve the use of a certain structure, but the goals are to enable students to talk about ideas, perform tasks, and solve problems.

Meeting Requirements of LA Theory.

1. Optimal input

   a) *Comprehensible.* The entire goal of classroom practice in the Natural Approach is to provide comprehensible input. Natural Approach teachers utilize realia, pictures, and students' previous knowledge to make their speech comprehensible from the first day.

   b) *Interesting/relevant.* The Natural Approach attempts to capture students' interest by using activities that encourage discussion of topics of personal interest to the students (e.g. "Suppose you are a famous person, and there is a newspaper article about you. Tell at least one thing about yourself which is mentioned in the article.").

      In the early stages, discussion focuses on personal information to establish a group feeling. Later, students discuss their past histories and eventually they are able to talk about their hopes and plans for the future.

   c) *Not grammatically sequenced.* The focus of the class is not on the presentation of grammar. There is a tendency for certain structures to be used more often in certain stages, but there is no deliberate sequencing.

   d) *Quantity.* Since the entire class period is filled with comprehensible input, the Natural Approach meets this requirement as well as any foreign language teaching method can.

   e) *Affective filter level.* Since the Natural Approach attempt to remain "true" to the Input Hypothesis, many sources of anxiety are reduced or eliminated. Students do not have to produce in the second language until they feel ready. Error correction for form is not done in the classroom. Also, an attempt is made to discuss topics interesting to students. This predicts lower filter strength than most other methods.

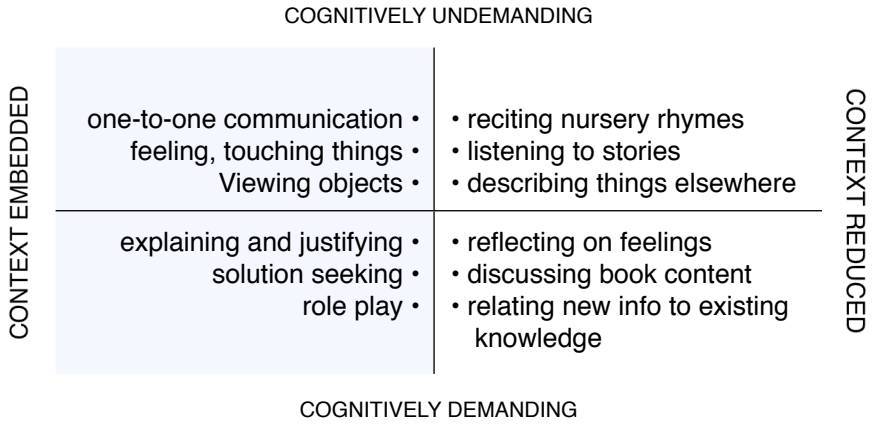
f) *Tools for conversational management.* Some tools for conversational management are provided in the form of very short dialogues, designed to help students converse with native speakers on predictable and frequent topics. Also, from the beginning, students are introduced to phrases and expressions that will help them control the teacher's input (e.g. "I don't understand", "What does ___ mean?", etc.).

2. Learning

The Natural Approach is designed to be consistent with what is known of Monitor functioning. The absence of error correction recognizes that there are constraints on when conscious grammar is used: students are asked to utilize the Monitor only at home, when they have time, when they are focussed on form, and when they know, or are learning, a rule. The Natural Approach can be adapted for variations in Monitor use, however, with varying amounts of homework or different types of homework for under-users and optimal users. Language Acquisition Theory predicts that younger children would not profit from grammar homework, while adolescents might be able to handle limited amounts.

3. Summary

The Natural Approach makes a deliberate effort to fit all requirements for both Learning and Acquisition. Its only weakness, according to Language Acquisition Theory, is that it remains a classroom method; for some students this in itself prohibits the communication of interesting and relevant topics.



Enabling learners to use the foreign language as a medium of communication has always been regarded as the aim of foreign language teaching. But the learners' communicative efficiency in the target language depends on their achieving a substantial degree of autonomy as language users, which includes factors like independence, self-reliance and self-confidence. Consequently, the most important question for language teachers is how to help their students to achieve this autonomy and to maintain it... learners will become more autonomous if as much of the classroom communication as possible is carried out in the target language and if this communication is "real to the learners in the sense that it engages them in understanding and producing meanings that are important to them."