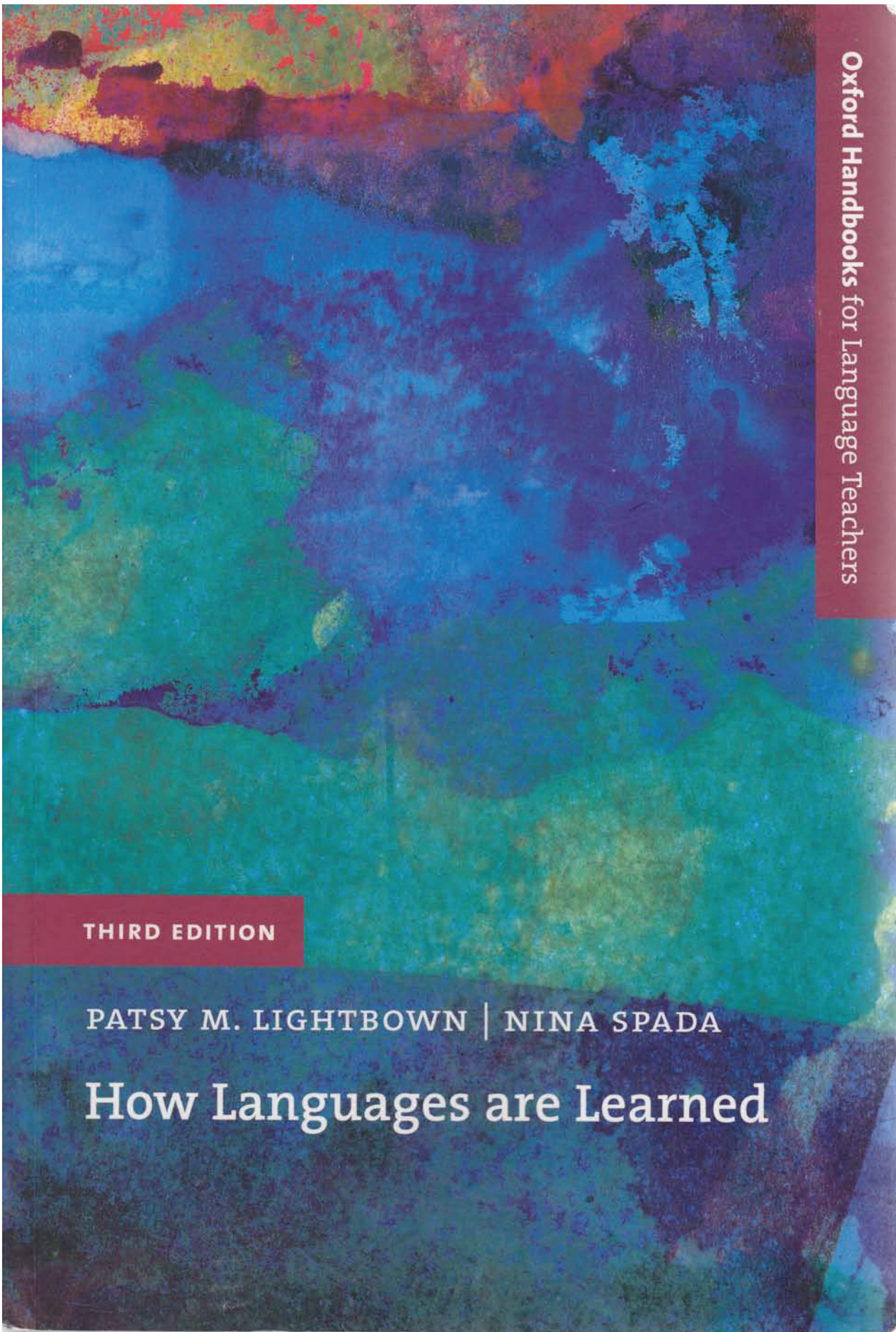




Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers

THIRD EDITION

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How Languages are Learned

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POPULAR IDEAS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING REVISITED

In the Introduction, we presented a number of commonly expressed opinions about how languages are learned. We asked you to indicate how strongly you agreed with these opinions. Now that you have read about some of the theory and research in second language acquisition, take another look at those ideas. Have you changed your mind about the importance of imitation or feedback on errors, or whether starting second language instruction early is the best approach? Do you feel that your views about second language acquisition have been changed or only confirmed by what you've read in the preceding chapters?

To conclude this introduction to second language acquisition research, here are some of our own reflections on these popular ideas about language learning.

1 Languages are learned mainly through imitation

It is difficult to find support for the argument that languages are learned mainly through imitation. For one thing, learners produce many novel sentences that they could not have heard before. These sentences are based on their developing understanding of how the language system works. This is evident in children's sentences such as 'I'm hiccuping up and I can't stop', and 'It was upside down but I turned it upside right', and with second language learners who say 'The cowboy rided into town', or 'The man that I spoke to him is angry'. These examples and many others provide evidence that language learners do not simply internalize a great list of imitated and memorized sentences.

This does not mean, however, that imitation has no role to play in language learning. Some children imitate a great deal as they acquire their first language, but they do not imitate everything they hear. Instead, they selectively imitate certain words or structures that they are in the process of learning. It is also the case that children who do little overt imitation learn language as quickly and as well as those who imitate more. Thus, imitation may be an individual learning strategy but it is not a universal characteristic of language learners.

Like first language learners, second language learners produce many sentences that they could not have heard. Some may find that they benefit from opportunities to imitate samples of the new language, and imitation is clearly important in developing pronunciation and intonation. For some advanced learners who are determined to improve their pronunciation, careful listening and imitation in a language laboratory can be very valuable. But for beginning learners, the slavish imitation and rote memorization that characterized audiolingual language approaches to language teaching can lead to a dead end. Learners need to do more than recite bits of perfectly accurate language. They learn as they make the effort needed to understand and make themselves understood in genuinely meaningful interaction. Otherwise, they may have acquired little more than a collection of sentences, waiting for the moment when those sentences will be useful!

2 Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors

There is considerable variation in the extent to which parents correct their children's speech. The variation is based partly on the children's age and partly on the parents' social, linguistic, and educational background. When children are very young, parents rarely comment on grammatical errors, although they may correct lapses in politeness or the choice of a word that doesn't make sense. As children reach school age, parents may correct the kinds of non-standard speech that they hope their children will outgrow, for example, 'Me and Fred are going outside now'.

Extensive observations of parents and children show that, as a rule, parents tend to focus on meaning rather than form when they correct children's speech. Thus, they may correct an incorrect word choice, an incorrect statement of the facts, or a rude remark, but they do not often react to errors that do not interfere with communication. What this tells us is that children cannot depend on consistent corrective feedback in order to learn the basic structure (the word order, the grammatical morphemes, the intonation patterns) of their language. Fortunately, they appear to be able to acquire the adult form of the language with little or no explicit feedback.

The case for second language learners is more complex. On the one hand, both children and adults can acquire a great deal of language without any formal instruction or feedback on error. On the other hand, the evidence suggests that, without corrective feedback and guidance, second language learners may persist in using certain ungrammatical forms for years.

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3 *Highly intelligent people are good language learners*

The kind of intelligence that is measured by IQ tests is often a good predictor of success in classrooms where the emphasis is on learning about the language (for example, grammar rules and vocabulary items). People who do well on IQ tests may do well on other kinds of tests as well. However, in natural language learning settings and in classrooms where interactive language use is emphasized, research has shown that learners with a wide variety of intellectual abilities can be successful language learners. This is especially true if the emphasis is on oral communication skills rather than metalinguistic knowledge. Most important, perhaps, is the fact that language learning involves a great variety of skills and abilities. Students should not be excluded from opportunities to learn another language on the grounds that they do not have the academic ability to succeed. In many educational contexts, students from immigrant or minority groups have no choice about learning a second language. What is essential is finding ways to engage the different kinds of ability that students bring to the learning environment.

4 *The best predictor of success in second language acquisition is motivation*

Everyone agrees that learners who want to learn tend to do better than those who don't. But we must not interpret this too rigidly. Sometimes, even highly motivated learners encounter great challenges in language learning. We know, for example, that learners who begin learning a second language as adults rarely achieve the fluency and accuracy that children do in first language acquisition. This should not be taken as evidence that adult second language learners are not motivated to learn. It may be a reflection of changes that come with age or of other individual differences such as language learning aptitude or how the instruction interacts with individual learners' styles and preferences for learning.

Teachers have no influence over learners' intrinsic motivation for learning a second language. Students come to classrooms from different backgrounds and life experiences, all of which have contributed to their motivation to learn and attitudes toward the target language and the community with which it is associated. The principal way that teachers can influence learners' motivation is by making the classroom a supportive environment in which students are stimulated, engaged in activities that are appropriate to their age, interests, and cultural backgrounds, and, most importantly, where students can experience success. This in turn can contribute to positive motivation, leading to still greater success.

5 *The earlier a second language is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning*

The decision about when to introduce second or foreign language instruction must depend on the objectives of the language programme in the particular social context of the school. When the objective is native-like performance in the second language, then it may be desirable to begin exposure to the language as early as possible. The research evidence is fairly strong that those who begin second language learning at an early age are most likely to eventually be indistinguishable from native speakers.

However, even in cases where native-like proficiency is targeted, it is important to recognize certain disadvantages of an early start for second language learning. When an early start means that children have little opportunity to continue to develop their first language, the resulting subtractive bilingualism may have lasting negative consequences. For children from minority-language backgrounds, programmes promoting the development of the first language both at home and at school may be more important for long-term success in the second language than an early start in the second language itself. Research shows that a good foundation in the child's first language, including the development of literacy, is a sound base to build on. Children who can begin their schooling in a language they already know will have more self-confidence, will be able to learn more effectively in the early school years, and will not lose valuable time in a period of limbo during which they struggle just to understand what is happening in the classroom.

For many children, there is no opportunity to have their early schooling in their first language. They are members of small minority groups where it is not practical for schools to offer them an educational programme in their first language, or they live in jurisdictions where legislation has mandated a single language of education for all children, regardless of their background. For these children, it is crucial to have sensitive educators who respect the children's difficulty, who encourage parents to maintain the home language, and who understand that second language learning takes time and effort.

For foreign language instruction or for second language instruction where the level of proficiency that is targeted is not native-like performance by all students, the situation is quite different. When the goal of the educational programme is basic communicative skill for all students, and where there is a strong commitment to maintaining and developing the child's first language, it can be more efficient to begin second language teaching later. Older children (for example, ten-year olds) are able to catch up quickly to those who began earlier (for example, at six- or seven-years old) in programmes offering only a few hours a week of instruction. This is

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especially true if the foreign language course includes a period of more intensive exposure to the new language. All school programmes should be based on realistic estimates of how long it takes to learn a second language. One or two hours a week—even for seven or eight years—will not produce advanced second language speakers. This 'drip-feed' approach often leads to frustration as learners feel that they have been studying 'for years' without making much progress. Sadly, they are sometimes right about this.

6 *Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language*

First, we should recognize that knowledge of one or more languages can contribute positively to many aspects of second or foreign language learning. If the languages are relatively close cousins (for example, English and German, Spanish and French, English and Spanish), there is much that learners already 'know'—including the alphabet, cognate words, as well as some basic principles of syntax.

On the other hand, the transfer of patterns from the native language is one of the major sources of errors in learner language. When errors are caused by learners' perception of some partial similarity between the first and second languages, they may be difficult to overcome, especially when learners are frequently in contact with other learners who make the same errors.

Aspects of the second language that are different from the first language will not necessarily be acquired later or with more difficulty than those aspects that are similar. Second language learning is not simply a process of putting second-language words into first-language sentences. In fact, learners may not always be able to take advantage of similarities unless they are pointed out to them. We saw that learners can be overly discriminating, failing to take advantage of similarities because they assume, incorrectly sometimes, that the languages must be different.

However, the first language is not the only influence on second language learning. Learners from different backgrounds often make the same kinds of errors, and some of these errors are remarkably similar to those made by first language learners. In such cases, second-language errors are evidence of the learners' efforts to discover the structure of the target language itself rather than attempts to transfer patterns from their first language.

7 *The best way to learn new vocabulary is through reading*

This statement is absolutely true. But it does not tell the whole story. Children expand their vocabulary dramatically during their school years, and reading is the major source of this growth. Second language learners can also increase their vocabulary knowledge through reading, but few second language learners will read the amount of target language text that a child reads throughout more than a decade of schooling. Research evidence suggests that second language learners benefit from opportunities to read material that is interesting and important to them. However, those who also receive guidance from instruction and develop good strategies for learning and remembering words will benefit more than those who simply focus on getting the main ideas from a text. What is perhaps most striking in the research is the evidence that in order to successfully guess the meanings of new words in a text, a reader usually needs to know 90 per cent or more of the words in that text.

8 *It is essential for learners to be able to pronounce all the individual sounds in the second language*

Research on pronunciation has shown that second language speakers' ability to make themselves understood depends more on their ability to reproduce the phrasing and stress patterns—the 'melody' of the language—than on their ability to articulate each individual sound. Another important emphasis in current research is the undeniable fact that most languages of the world are spoken in many different varieties. Thus, it no longer seems appropriate to insist that learners be taught only one language variety or that only native speakers of a particular variety are the best teachers. Rather, learners need to learn to understand and produce language varieties that will permit them to engage in communicative interaction with the interlocutors they are most likely to encounter.

9 *Once learners know roughly 1,000 words and the basic structure of a second language, they can easily participate in conversations with native speakers*

It is true that most conversational language involves only a relatively limited number of words and sentence types. However, learners will find it easier to understand and to make themselves understood if they also have an understanding of some of the pragmatic features of the new language. It is sometimes useful for them to focus their attention on such things as how speakers show respect, apologize, or make requests. The cultural differences

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in these types of interactions sometimes lead to communication breakdown or misunderstandings, even when the words and the sentence structures are correct.

10 Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practise examples of each one before going on to another

Second language learning is not simply linear in its development. Learners may use a particular form accurately at stage *x* (suggesting that they have learned that form), fail to produce the form (or make errors when they attempt it) at stage *y*, and produce it accurately again at stage *z*. The decline in accuracy at stage *y* may show that learners are incorporating new information about the language into their interlanguage. We saw, for example, how learners may ask correct formulaic questions such as 'What's that?', or 'How do you say *proche* in English?', and then produce questions like 'What you're doing with that?' at a later time. Language development is not just adding one rule after another. Rather, it involves processes of integrating new language forms and patterns into an existing interlanguage, readjusting and restructuring until all the pieces fit.

Some structure-based approaches to teaching are based on the false assumption that second language development is a sort of accumulation of rules. This can be seen in the organization of textbooks that introduce a particular language feature in the first unit and reinforce it in several subsequent units, and then move on the next feature, with only rare opportunities for learners to practise the ones previously taught. This isolated presentation and practice of one structure at a time does not provide learners with an opportunity to discover how different language features compare and contrast in normal language use. It is also likely that, without opportunities to continue hearing, seeing, and using them, the language features learned in the first unit will have been forgotten long before the last.

11 Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones

Research has shown that no matter how language is presented to learners, certain structures are acquired before others. This suggests that it is neither necessary nor desirable to restrict learners' exposure to structures that are perceived in linguistic terms to be 'simple'—particularly when this involves the isolated presentation, ordering, and practice of 'simple' to 'complex' features.

At the same time, there is no doubt that second language learners benefit from the efforts of native speakers and fluent bilinguals to modify their speech to help them understand. The language used in modified interaction may contain a variety of linguistic structures, some 'simple' and some 'complex'. However, it also includes a range of adjustments that enable second language learners to engage in interactions with native and more advanced speakers of the second language more easily—more repetition, slower rate of delivery, paraphrasing, etc.

Teachers must also be aware, however, that some linguistic forms are so rare in classroom language that learners have little opportunity to hear, use, and learn them if the teacher does not make a point of providing them. These are not necessarily difficult or complex forms. As we saw in Chapter 6 (Study 31) some common language forms turn out to be extremely rare in classroom language.

12 Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits

Errors are a natural part of language learning. This is true of the development of a child's first language as well as of second language learning by children and adults. Errors reflect the patterns of learners' developing interlanguage systems—showing where they have overgeneralized a second language rule or where they have inappropriately transferred a first language pattern to the second language.

Teachers have a responsibility to help learners do their best, and this includes the provision of explicit, form-focused instruction and feedback on error. When errors are persistent, especially when they are shared by almost all students in a class, it is important to bring the problem to their attention. This does not mean that learners should be expected to adopt the correct form or structure immediately or consistently. If the error is based on a developmental pattern, the instruction or feedback may be useful only when the learner is ready for it. It may be necessary to repeat feedback on error many times.

Excessive feedback on error can have a negative effect on motivation, of course, and teachers must be sensitive to their students' reactions to correction. The amount and type of correction that is offered will also vary according to the specific characteristics of the students, as well as their relationship with the teacher and with each other. Children and adults with little education in their first language will not benefit greatly from sophisticated metalinguistic explanations, but university students who are advanced learners of the language may find such explanations of great value.

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Immediate reaction to errors in an oral communication setting may embarrass some students and discourage them from speaking, while for others, such correction is exactly what is needed to help them notice a persistent error at just the moment when it occurs.

13 Teachers should use materials that expose students only to language structures they have already been taught

Such a procedure can provide comprehensible input of course, but—given a meaningful context—learners can comprehend the general meaning of oral or written texts that contain vocabulary and structures they have not ‘mastered’. Thus, restricting classroom second language materials to those that contain little or nothing that is new may have several negative consequences. There will undoubtedly be a loss of motivation if students are not sufficiently challenged. Students also need to develop strategies for dealing with ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ material if they are eventually going to be prepared for language use outside the classroom. They do this first with the teacher’s guidance and then independently. Restricting students to step-by-step exposure to the language extends their dependency.

When a particular form is introduced for the first time, or when the teacher feels there is a need for correction of a persistent problem, it is appropriate to use narrow-focus materials that isolate one element in a context where other things seem easy. But it would be a disservice to students to use such materials exclusively or even predominantly. We should remember that learners who successfully acquire a second language outside classrooms certainly are exposed to a great variety of forms and structures they have not mastered.

14 When learners are allowed to interact freely (for example, in group or pair activities), they copy each other’s mistakes

If the activities are well designed and learners are appropriately matched, pair and group work provides far more practice in speaking and participating in conversations than a teacher-centred class ever could. Somewhat surprisingly, research has shown that learners do not produce any more errors in their speech when talking to learners at similar levels of proficiency than they do when speaking to learners at more advanced levels or to native speakers. The research also shows, however, that learners at similar levels cannot ordinarily provide each other with information that would help to correct those errors. However, some studies show how tasks can be devised in such a

way that learners working together can discover how to express or interpret meaning in the second language. In order for this to happen, the tasks must be carefully planned to give learners access to new language they need.

Group and pair work is a valuable addition to the variety of activities that encourage and promote second language development. Used in combination with individual work and teacher-centred activities, it plays an important role in language teaching and learning.

15 Students learn what they are taught

Teachers know from experience that students don't learn everything they are taught. More important, however, is the fact that they eventually know far more than they are taught directly. Some teaching methods typically give learners the opportunity to learn only a restricted number of words and sentence types. Even when the language teaching method provides much richer language input, the fact that something is taught or made available in the input does not mean learners will acquire it right away. For example, some aspects of the second language emerge and evolve according to 'natural' sequences of development and learners may be more likely to learn certain language features when they are developmentally 'ready'. Thus, attempts to teach aspects of language that are too far away from the learner's current stage of development will usually be frustrating.

Other aspects of language, however, for example, vocabulary, can be taught at any time, as long as the learners are interested in the opportunity to learn and the teaching methods are appropriate to the learner's age, interests, needs, experiences, and learning styles. Fortunately, learners can learn a great deal that no one ever teaches them. They are able to use their own internal learning mechanisms to discover many of the complex rules and relationships that underlie the language they are learning. In this sense, students learn much more than they are taught.

16 Teachers should respond to students' errors by correctly rephrasing what they have said rather than by explicitly pointing out the error

This kind of feedback, referred to as 'recasts' has been found to be by far the most common type of feedback in second language classrooms. This has been shown to be true for learners at different ages and in different instructional models—from audiolingual to communicative and content-based instruction. It has the advantage of not interrupting the flow of interaction. It is seen as indirect and polite, a way of giving students the information they need without embarrassing them.

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Research with adult learners, especially in classes with a general focus on grammar and accurate language use, shows that learners are responsive to this kind of feedback. Research in which learners interact individually with interlocutors has also shown that recasts are perceived as corrective feedback, even though learners may not always know exactly which language features the feedback is focused on.

In content-based instruction (for example, immersion classes) and in communicative instruction with younger learners, more explicit forms of feedback have been found to be more effective in getting learners to respond immediately. Recasts often appear to be misinterpreted. Learners seem to hear them as confirmation of meaning rather than as correction of form. In these situations, recasts have been found to be more effective if the teacher has a method of signalling to the student—tone of voice, gesture, or facial expression—that says to the student, 'I think I understand what you are saying, and I'm telling you how you can say it better'.

17 Students can learn both language and academic content (for example, science and history) simultaneously in classes where the subject matter is taught in their second language

The advantages of content-based instruction are numerous. Motivation is increased when the material that is used for language teaching has an inherent value to the students. That is, it creates a genuine, immediate need to learn the language. Content-based instruction is usually associated with the opportunity to spend more time in contact with the language, without losing out on instruction in other subject matter. The range of vocabulary and language structure that students encounter in learning academic subjects is more varied than that which is typically available in foreign language classes.

Research has confirmed that students in content-based and immersion classes develop comprehension skills, vocabulary, and general communicative competence in the new language. Teachers and researchers have also found, however, that the ability to understand the content and to function in classroom interaction does not ensure that students will continue to improve in certain aspects of their second language, especially in areas of accuracy on language features that do not usually interfere with meaning. Thus, for example, students can spend years in French immersion without achieving accuracy in marking nouns for gender or verbs for tense. Experimental studies in which an element of form-focused instruction was added to the content-based instruction have shown that, with guidance, students can

improve in these areas as well. Both students and teachers need to keep in mind that content-based language teaching is also language teaching.

Conclusion

Knowing more about second language acquisition research will not tell you what to do in your classroom tomorrow morning. We hope, however, that this book has provided you with information that encourages you to reflect on your experience in teaching. We hope, in addition, that this reflection will contribute to a better understanding of your responsibilities as a teacher and those of your students as language learners.

As we have seen, language learning is affected by many factors. Among these are the personal characteristics and experiences of the learner, the social and cultural environment both inside and outside the classroom, the structure of the native and target languages, opportunities for interaction with speakers of the target language, and access to correction and form-focused instruction. It is clear that teachers do not have control over all these factors. Nevertheless, a better understanding of them will permit teachers and learners to make the most of the time they spend together in the twin processes of teaching and learning a second language.

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