

# SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER

## The Essential Elements of Language Learning



**James Hunter** *has taught ESL/EFL for over 30 years and is the director of TESOL Programs at Gonzaga University. He has a PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Birmingham, UK, and his research interests include Second Language Acquisition, corpus linguistics, instructional technologies, and teacher development.*

[hunter@gonzaga.edu](mailto:hunter@gonzaga.edu)



**Bridget Green** *has over 30 years' ESL/EFL teaching experience in the US, Japan, Spain, and the United Arab Emirates, and has recently returned from an amazing English Language Specialist teacher-training course in Uganda. In addition, she has 15 years' teacher-training experience at the post-secondary level. She is currently a teacher-training consultant.*

[bridgetptgreen@gmail.com](mailto:bridgetptgreen@gmail.com)



**Anny Fritzen Case** *has been involved in K-12 and adult ESL instruction and teacher training for over 20 years. Her scholarship focuses on multilingual learners, in particular, ways in which schools intentionally and unintentionally limit immigrant and refugee students' access to equitable and intellectually rich instruction.*

[casea@gonzaga.edu](mailto:casea@gonzaga.edu)

Ever since Spolsky (1989) outlined his 74 “conditions” for language learning, assumptions and theories about how languages are learned have evolved and proliferated, often to a bewildering degree of detail and complexity. However, consistent research findings over time have guided the principles of language acquisition towards something approximating a general understanding. It is occasionally useful to revisit the principles that underpin our profession in order to be reminded of what is essential to language learning. This article, therefore, outlines the four essential elements currently believed to be necessary for language acquisition – input, output, cognitive and affective engagement, and time. We also describe two others that, while not essential, might accelerate the process of language development – instruction and corrective feedback.

### Comprehensible Input

It is essential that learners are continually exposed to a variety of authentic, comprehensible input – input that they can understand despite not understanding all the words and structures in it. In Krashen’s view, the ideal input is “‘just beyond’ the acquirer’s current level of competence” ( $i + 1$ , in his terms), meaning that it can only just be understood (1981, p. 103). This kind of input helps learners to acquire language naturally, like children learn their first language, rather than learning it consciously. Input can be made comprehensible through systematic scaffolding that

- activates schema (accessing students’ background knowledge about the content),

- moves from simpler to increasingly more complex tasks,
- slows down the pace of exposure, and
- adds in more elaborative processing of the text with, for example, a series of reiterations, paraphrases, and summaries.

Trying to understand language slightly above their level encourages learners to use natural learning strategies such as guessing words from context and inferring meaning. A teacher needs to know their learners' levels in order to select comprehensible input and scaffold it appropriately, and in a class of mixed ability, provide different learners with different texts – or at least different tasks – if needed. The more meaningful, relevant, and stimulating the texts, tasks, and themes, the more motivated the learners will be to continue the long process of language acquisition. Motivation is the strongest predictor of learning success (Mishan & Timmis, 2015, p. 18) and input that meets the learners' interests and needs stimulates motivation. Comprehensible input on its own, however, is not sufficient to create the optimal conditions for language learning.

## **Output and Negotiated Interaction**

Output is the language that a learner produces, in the form of speech, writing, or signs (in the case of sign languages). Negotiated interaction is a process that speakers go through to reach a clear understanding of each other. Many researchers (e.g., Ellis, 2008; Swain, 1985) have argued that, when learners have to make efforts to ensure that their meaning is clear to listeners and readers, acquisition of the language is promoted. "Information gap" activities such as jigsaw readings or listenings, group story building, spot-the-differences tasks, and communicative crosswords are examples of controlled activities that give learners the opportunity to develop their communicative competence through negotiation of meaning as they share real information. The less controlled an activity is, the more genuine communication takes place and the more opportunities there are for negotiated interaction. Meaningful, purposeful, negotiated interactions entail the use of functional and pragmatic language, which learners need to develop in order to communicate effectively in the target language. Real-world texts and tasks are more likely to engage learners and produce noticing and intake (Mishan, 2005).

## **Affective and Cognitive Engagement**

While comprehensible input, output, and negotiated interaction may be considered the raw ingredients for language learning, affective and cognitive engagement enable learners to take the necessary risks involved in practicing a new language. Motivated learners feel stimulated and challenged in a respectful environment

that fosters problem-solving and creativity. To a large degree, learning a language involves taking risks: the learner has to try to express meaning without knowing the accepted ways to do this in the target language; saying the wrong thing can cause embarrassment or make the learner (especially adult learners) sound and feel childish; learners may not feel confident enough to speak in the presence of more proficient speakers or may not really know what's going on in the conversation, especially in an academic setting. In addition, some learners may feel alienated or excluded, especially those who did not choose to learn the target language (e.g., many refugees and immigrants).

Teachers have a responsibility to foster a learning environment of affective engagement in which all participants feel welcome and able to take risks without fear of ridicule, and one of cognitive engagement in which participants feel intellectually challenged via relevant input that is contextualized, personalized, and localized. Language learners with a positive affect who can apply cognitive and metacognitive strategies are much more likely to achieve communicative competence (Plonsky, 2011); focusing on the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy is a useful guide to achieving more cognitive engagement by moving beyond memorization to the more complex realms of analysis, evaluation, and creativity, in which learners make genuine choices about the content, presentation, and assessment of their language production.

## **Time**

Time is important in language acquisition for many reasons: learners need time to understand the relationship between sounds (or other signs and symbols) and meaning. Learners also need time to process language input (whether consciously or unconsciously) so that they can begin to see and process patterns, regularities, and rules. They need time to develop the confidence to produce output – many learners don't produce anything for a very long time. More time also means a greater chance of being exposed to new language input – and less common language input – which will increase the complexity of what a learner knows and can do with the language. Sufficient time allows learners to process increasingly complex language while also allowing for language to be systematically recycled, encoded in long-term memory, and more fully automatized (DeKeyser, 2007).

In the typical EFL classroom setting, learners have a limited amount of time to learn a language – on average, 2.5 hours per week (Collins & Muñoz, 2016). In EFL and ESL settings, it is possible to increase exposure through content-based instruction. In either case, however, it is important for teachers to understand how much time language acquisition takes – and so not lose patience with their learners, who

# THE ESSENTIALS OF second language acquisition

input + output + affective & cognitive engagement + time  
[+/- instruction & corrective feedback] leads to language acquisition

## 1 comprehensible input

Learners need repeated exposure to language that is

- rich
- comprehensible
- meaningful
- relevant
- stimulating
- authentic & varied.



## 2 output & negotiated interaction

Purposeful, negotiated interactions flow from communicative activities based on real-world texts & tasks and result in noticing and intake.



## 3 affective & cognitive engagement

Motivated learners feel stimulated and challenged in a respectful environment that fosters problem-solving and creativity.



## 4 time

Learners need sufficient time to

- process increasingly complex language
- allow for language to be more fully automatized and encoded in long-term memory.



Oh, and these are also helpful:

## instruction + corrective feedback

Instructors provide rich input, opportunities for negotiation of meaning, and focused attention on form which lead, over time, to more fluency, accuracy, and complexity.



“should know” what has been taught — and also to use the time effectively to maximize learning opportunities (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). In fact, research indicates that most learners will need an average of 1-2 years to develop conversational proficiency in English and 5-7 years to attain academic language proficiency (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

## Helpful Elements: Instruction and Corrective Feedback

Instruction (i.e. implicit or explicit focus on language, usually in a classroom setting with an instructor facilitating) can be very effective in promoting language acquisition, but isn't always necessary: after all, we didn't learn our first language in a classroom, and many

second language learners seem to “pick up” the target language through naturally occurring social situations. One way to think about instruction is that it can speed up the process of acquisition by

- providing rich input (and exposure to less common - e.g., academic - language);
- focusing learners’ attention on how the language works;
- giving intentional opportunities for interaction and practice; and
- providing corrective feedback.

There are many approaches and methods in language instruction, so it is very hard to generalize about the effectiveness of “instruction” without specifying the type of instruction. It is also important to realize that instruction does not equal learning: just because you have “taught” it, doesn’t mean they have “learned” it. Very often, learners focus on meaning rather than on form, and care more about fluent communication than accuracy, or “getting it right.”

Corrective feedback, which refers to any attempt to modify a learner’s output when it does not conform to target-language norms or rules, can thus be very helpful in guiding learners towards more accurate use. In general, corrective feedback is intended to do two things: draw the learner’s attention to the fact that part

of her output is not target-like and provide (or remind the learner about) the target-like form. A learner’s competence in a language changes over time, as new input is assimilated and “rules” are constructed or modified. This is often called interlanguage (Selinker, 1972; Selinker & Rutherford, 1992), and it is affected not only by comprehensible input, but also by previous language experience, especially in the first language. Corrective feedback, then, can push a learner’s interlanguage towards more fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Without correction in the form of recasts, clarification, repetition, metalinguistic prompts, or delayed feedback, it is likely that output which “works” (communicates the intended meaning) will remain unchanged – whether or not it is target-like (Hunter, 2012).

## Conclusion

We recognize that the more we generalize, the more we risk over-simplifying the very complex process of second language acquisition; nevertheless, we believe that keeping these learning principles (see [graphic](#)) foremost in mind when developing curriculum, planning a course, designing materials, or just setting off to class might help us to remain focused on what is essential in any language-learning context.

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