

INTRODUCTION

When new foreign language teaching methods and textbooks are introduced, they are often said to be based on the latest research in psychology, linguistics, or pedagogy. Teachers are told that they will be more effective than those that have gone before. In many cases, the new approaches are prescribed for immediate implementation in a school or region. Sometimes, the new materials come with opportunities for extensive training in their implementation. Sometimes, they are simply ordered and distributed to teachers who have to do their best to use them effectively.

Teachers have seen many different approaches over the past fifty years. One approach requires students to learn rules of grammar and lists of vocabulary to use in translating literary texts. Another emphasizes the value of having students imitate and practise a set of correct sentences and memorize entire dialogues. Yet another stresses the importance of encouraging ‘natural’ communication between students as they engage co-operatively in tasks or projects while using the new language. In some classrooms, the second language is used as the medium to teach subject matter, with the assumption that the language itself will be learned incidentally as students focus on the academic content.

How are teachers to evaluate the potential effectiveness of new methods? To be sure, the most important influence on teachers’ decisions is their own experience with previous successes or disappointments, as well as their understanding of the needs and abilities of their students. We believe that ideas drawn from research and theory in second language acquisition are also valuable in helping teachers evaluate claims made by proponents of various language teaching methods. The goal of this book is to introduce teachers—both novice and experienced—to some of the language acquisition research that may help them not only to evaluate existing textbooks and materials but also to adapt them in ways that are more consistent with our understanding of how languages are learned.

The book begins with a chapter on language learning in early childhood. This background is important because both second language research and second language teaching have been influenced by changes in our understanding of how children acquire their first language. In fact, one significant research finding concerns the similarities between first and second language acquisition.

In Chapter 2, several theories that have been advanced to explain second language learning are presented and discussed. In Chapter 3, we turn our attention to how individual learner characteristics may affect success. In Chapter 4, we look at second language learners' developing knowledge and their ability to use that knowledge. Chapter 5 begins with a comparison of natural and instructional environments for second language learning. We then examine some different ways in which classroom researchers have observed and described teaching and learning practices in second language classrooms.

In Chapter 6, we examine some of the proposals that have been made for second language teaching. Examples of research related to each of the proposals are presented, leading to a discussion of the evidence available for assessing their effectiveness. The chapter ends with a discussion of what research findings suggest about the most effective ways to teach and learn a second language in the classroom.

A Glossary provides a quick reference for a number of terms that may be new or have specific technical meanings in the context of language acquisition research. Glossary words are shown in small capital letters where they first appear in the text. For readers who would like to find out more, a list of suggestions for further reading is included at the end of each chapter. The Bibliography provides full reference information for the suggested readings and all the works that are referred to in the text.

We have tried to present the information in a way that does not assume that readers are already familiar with research methods or theoretical issues in second language learning. Examples and case studies are included throughout the book to illustrate the research ideas. Many of the examples are taken from second language classrooms. We have included a number of opportunities for readers to practise some of the techniques of observation and analysis used in the research that we review in this book.

Before we begin ...

It is probably true, as some have claimed, that most of us teach as we were taught or in a way that matches our ideas and preferences about how we learn. Take a moment to reflect on your views about how languages are learned and what you think this means about how they should be taught. The statements on the following pages summarize some popular views about language learning and teaching. Think about whether you agree or disagree with each opinion. Keep these statements and your reactions to them in mind as you read about current research and theory in second language learning. We will return to these opinions in Chapter 7.

Popular opinions about language learning and teaching

Indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement by marking an X at the appropriate point on the line between 'strongly agree' and 'strongly disagree'.

- 1 Languages are learned mainly through imitation.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 2 Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 3 Highly intelligent people are good language learners.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 4 The most important predictor of success in second language acquisition is motivation.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 5 The earlier a second language is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 6 Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 7 The best way to learn new vocabulary is through reading.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 8 It is essential for learners to be able to pronounce all the individual sounds in the second language.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 9 Once learners know roughly 1000 words and the basic structure of a language, they can easily participate in conversations with native speakers.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 10 Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practise examples of each one before going on to another.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree

- 11** Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 12** Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 13** Teachers should use materials that expose students to only those language structures they have already been taught.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 14** When learners are allowed to interact freely (for example, in group or pair activities), they copy each other's mistakes.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 15** Students learn what they are taught.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 16** Teachers should respond to students' errors by correctly rephrasing what they have said rather than by explicitly pointing out the error.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree
- 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.
strongly agree _____ strongly disagree

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