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What do successful language learners and their teachers do?



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Learning a language: What is there to learn?

When it comes to language teaching and learning, there are very different ideas about what is important to learn and how best to learn it, and much depends upon the context and goals of the learner. Traditional approaches to language learning often focus on knowledge about language, and involve memorizing vocabulary lists and learning the grammar of a language. These often include explicit instruction of rules about language use, and use grammatical terminology to explain their reasoning. This approach has been associated with formal exams in school and university settings.

However, both our ideas about language, and our teaching and assessment practices have changed over the past five decades, reflecting a shift to a focus on communicative language ability[1]. The emphasis of learning is placed on our ability to use language for everyday purposes, rather than to know about language. In place of rote learning, translation, exercises that focus on the patterns of language, and the use of simplified texts created just for language learners, there is more time spent on reading and hearing 'authentic' spoken and written texts, and more time using language for 'real world' purposes. In this case, second[2] language learning involves developing experience using the target language[3] and becoming familiar with the ways in which this language system works – that is, how phonology, syntax, morphology, lexis and paralinguistic components work together for communication[4].

Language learning involves much more than grammatical or lexical knowledge: it involves developing the competence to communicate in ways that are appropriate to the 'who, what, when, where and why' of communicating.

Figure 1 gives a snapshot of the kind of input learners might hear over time. They may notice the phrase 'could be' used in different contexts, and come to recognize a pattern in which this phrase, often followed by a verb in the past tense, carries the meaning of a hypothetical suggestion – something that has not yet happened. In this way, students develop awareness of particular lexico-grammatical features through input and through trying out the language themselves Such examples of real-world language use extracted from 'corpora' (large collections of authentic samples of the target language, spoken or written) can be used to help learners identify patterns of the language system.

1 Hymes (1972); Bachman (1990).

2 The term 'second' language is used here to refer to any additional language and encompasses varying learning contexts, whether learning the language of the majority in the community or where the classroom represents the sole or primary context for use of that language.

3 The term 'target language' refers to the language that is being learned.

4 Coffin, Donohue & North (2009).

... Some people even argue that they	**could be**	used as cover by enemy aircraft in time of ...
... the public interest. "I just wish I	**could be**	convinced we're not reacting too much to ...
... Obviously, if a useful payload	**could be**	launched to escape velocity, it could also be ...
... instead of homeless. The vibrations	**could be**	felt from Los Angeles to Oregon and all the ...
... of the Perseus myths. This	**could be**	Medusa, don't you think? And then here, ...

Figure 1 — An excerpt from corpus data, showing the use of 'could be' in different contexts[5]

As well as coming to understand how specific concepts such as modality[6], time and relationships[7] are indicated in another language system, learners need to work out how to express these meanings in ways that are appropriate to the context. In all languages, meaning is expressed in different ways depending on the audience, the relationship between those involved, and the mode of communication (oral or written, by phone, internet, email, social media, face-to-face ...). It also changes according to what we are talking about and where we are. So language learning involves much more than grammatical or lexical knowledge: it involves developing the competence to communicate in ways that are appropriate to the 'who, what, when, where and why' of communicating.

For teachers, this suggests that we need to provide learners with a wide variety of contexts in which language is used. Competence is reflected, for example, in our ability to recognise what different texts mean and what their purpose is, such as – to recognise the purpose of a recipe, a newspaper article, a formal email or a postcard to a friend. Helping students identify the features of different texts can provide strategies for both receptive and productive use of language specific to purpose.

For example, in talking to one's teacher to apologize for handing in a late assignment, one chooses to use particular words, and a particular way of structuring the apology which is very different to the language choices made in texting a friend to say sorry for not turning up to a party. Similarly, writing a formal letter for a job application would be entirely different in content, grammar, vocabulary and structure to writing a letter to one's grandmother to recount progress at school and recent experiences.

DID YOU KNOW?

Communicative competence is a term first coined by sociologist Dell Hymes (1972), who recognised that use of a language involves more than just grammatical knowledge. It also involves social and cultural knowledge about how to communicate with whom about what, when, and where. Based on this work, linguists such as Bachman & Palmer (1996) developed a description of 'Communicative Language Ability'. This includes the ability to use language appropriate to context, and to understand, recognise and use different types of discourse according to specific purposes. It also allows one to compensate for limited resources by using other communication strategies such as hand gesture, body language, facial expression and context. These are all aspects that are focused on in language classes.

5 Examples taken from the Cambridge English Corpus, a database of spoken and written English.
6 Modality expresses the degree of possibility or impossibility (e.g. 'will', 'must' versus 'might', 'could').
7 Relationships can be described in terms of the social distance between the people involved in the communication (e.g. by terms of address, use of more or less formal language).



DID YOU KNOW?

When learners recognise language as a set of choices rather than a set of rules, they can start to see the patterns of how particular meanings are attributed to specific language forms in specific contexts. Coffin, North, & Donohue (2009) suggest each choice gives particular meanings to the topic or activity involved, the status of the participants and the roles they play, as well as the mode of communication. For this reason, learners benefit when they have varied opportunities to see how language is used in different types of oral, written and multimodal texts and to identify the particular language features of each.

Understanding how people learn to use a second language is essential for thinking about strategies for learning and teaching. Over 50 years of theory and research about instructed second language acquisition provides a useful base for this. What we do know is that language learning, like any learning, requires time on task and involves learners' individual differences[8] in ways of perceiving and thinking. Learning is a cumulative process[9]. Through our experience with the target language we steadily increase and build up familiarity. We adjust our understanding, interpretations and language use as we accommodate new input, sometimes modifying our internal system of the target language. For this reason, language input and opportunities to actively use the target language to communicate are crucial components, as well as paying attention to how language works, and spending time practicing, building up fluency[10]. These four elements are explored in more detail later, but first let's focus on language learners themselves (and their teachers) and how they can make the most of learning in classroom settings.

8 Dörnyei & Ryan (2015).
9 Ellis (2015).
10 For an overview of the theory behind this see Mackey, Abbuhl & Gass (2012).

The good language learner

Aptitude

What characterizes a 'good language learner'? Language learning involves abilities everyone possesses, but to varying degrees. Some people might be 'naturally good' because they may possess certain cognitive abilities, to a higher degree than average, which give them an aptitude for learning. These include, for example, the ability to hear and discriminate between different sounds, and imitate them accurately (phonemic coding ability). Such people are good at hearing distinctions between sounds that are similar but different, and they are good at mimicking. Language aptitude includes the ability to recognise patterns in language (grammatical sensitivity), and infer rules that seem to underlie these patterns (analytic language ability)[11], to notice for example the different functions words have, and recognise how meaning is expressed. The ability to retain and process input simultaneously (that is, one's working memory capacity)[12] is also important. This has advantages for listening and speaking, reading and writing. Students with high aptitude in any or all of these areas can learn more quickly and more efficiently than others[13]. Happily though, language aptitude is just one part of the story.

Motivation

Motivation contributes greatly to success as a language learner, and can compensate for lower aptitude. Most would recognise motivation and self-regulation as two of the key attributes of a 'good learner'[14]. That is, successful learners are often those who are autonomous in their learning – they are not dependent on the teacher alone, but take initiative in how they manage their learning. For example, they involve themselves in language use beyond the classroom in ways that are personally appealing to them, as the following strategies suggest. Each of these strategies[15] help learners (1) increase their exposure to language input, or (2) provide opportunities to use the target language to communicate with others, or (3) pay attention to language itself, or (4) practise as much as possible[16].



Successful language learners are often those who are able to imagine themselves as capable second language users in the future, or as part of a community who speak the target language[17]. Such students have worked out strategies that enable them to continue language learning in spite of times of tedium and inevitable setbacks. Ushioda[18] suggests this ability to persevere in learning a second language may be fuelled by strategies such as being involved in activities the individual finds intrinsically motivating. For example, such students may watch

11 Skehan (2002).
12 Skehan (2002).
13 Dörnyei & Ryan (2015).
14 Ushioda (2003; 2008).
15 For more ideas see Cohen (2011).
16 For an overview of the theory behind this see Mackey, Abbuhl & Gass (2012).
17 Dörnyei (2009).
18 Ushioda (2003; 2008).

movies or cartoons in the target language, make up plays or stories in the target language with a friend, use the target language over social media, create chants or mnemonics[19] to remember patterns of verb forms or vocabulary, use colourful pens on paper or a stylus pen on a digital pad to draw, or highlight or make notes on a written text to make memory work more fun.

We focus here mainly on motivation and strategies to support learner autonomy, as there is general agreement among researchers that, along with aptitude, motivation is one of the two primary characteristics of successful language learners. Language learning is a long-term goal, often involving unexpected difficulties. Motivation has often been described as the driving force behind learning, pushing us to greater effort in the face of adversity, helping to sustain that effort and not to give up[20]. Motivation can come from a range of sources, among them, a positive relationship between teacher and students[21], a sense of confidence and high expectation from the teacher[22], and affiliation with peers. Success on challenging tasks and encouragement during difficulties can also stimulate motivation, particularly if the willingness to try to meet a challenge is followed by the experience of success. Self-esteem and self-perception as a good language learner makes a huge difference[23].

Individual learner differences

Other individual differences such as personality, cognitive and learning preferences, and willingness to communicate can also contribute to relative success at learning. However, this is dependent on the match between the individual, the teaching focus and the instructional method. Crucially, the teacher can make a difference in promoting learner autonomy and helping learners to develop strategies that match their particular strengths and needs. For example, based on their research among learners with specific learning differences, Judit Kormos and Margaret Smith[24] suggest building habits such as consistently building up and revisiting vocabulary collections, and using multi-sensory techniques. Strongly visual learners can benefit from using colours to highlight different parts of language, helping them to notice different functions or important beginnings and endings to words.

According to the teacher's relationship to the students, and their ability to manipulate the learning environment to suit their needs, they can help students make the most of their abilities, to develop and maintain motivation[25] and to learn through the teacher's explicit support to do those things others do intuitively[26]. There are many strategies to help make the work of language learning more efficient, and language teachers and teaching materials can play a vital part in fostering this. This can be both through introducing a range of strategies to students and by including 'real-world' tasks that motivate language use, both receptive and productive[27].

DID YOU KNOW?

About 10% of students in any class are likely to show signs of a specific learning difference (SpLD), that poses challenges for language learning (e.g. dyslexia or autism). Kormos & Smith (2012) suggest that by using more inclusive ways of teaching, all students have the means to be successful language learners. This includes providing a range of task-types and a variety of input and response formats (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic), as well as frequent well-spaced practice opportunities for production and reception activities, with built in repetition possibilities and the chance to revisit material.

19 A mnemonic involves using letters, images, ideas or word associations as a memory aid.
20 Dörnyei & Ryan (2015).
21 Hattie (2012).
22 Rubie-Davies (2007).
23 Dörnyei (2005).
24 Kormos & Smith (2012).
25 Dörnyei & Kubanyiova (2014).
26 Erlam (2005); Kormos & Smith (2012).
27 Nation & Newton (2009); Oliver & Philp (2014); Shapiro, Farrelly & Tomaš (2014).

Teacher and peer support

Both teacher scaffolding and peer assistance can promote motivation. Rather than doing the task for the student, scaffolding enables the student to complete the task successfully. Faced with a difficult reading or listening task for example, a student may initially be overwhelmed and give up. But through progressive stages, with scaffolding by the teacher[28], students can be stretched to achieve their goals. For example, the teacher can reduce the complexity of the task into a series of manageable chunks, or help the student focus on key language and ideas within the text, rather than trying to understand every single word. Peer group activities can provide the space to think through problems at their own pace and level.

For example, peer interaction may help relate the topic of a difficult text to the students' own experience so that they are able to exploit personal knowledge and make more informed guesses about unclear sections of a text. This can train students to draw on a variety of sources to make sense of unfamiliar language or complex ideas.

Similarly, during activities that require students to exchange information or share ideas, teachers support students' own use of the target language through a range of scaffolding techniques. This can include using visuals as prompts, providing questions to guide production, and giving feedback to improve accuracy or to model language use.

DID YOU KNOW?

'Scaffolding' (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) was a term first used to describe the kind of assistance adults provide to children that enables them to complete a task they could not do independently (solve a puzzle, work out a maths problem). A scaffold temporarily provides the shape of a structure as it is being built. This metaphor applies to many kinds of teacher assistance too: a process in which the teacher's support is in line with the learner's level of expertise – it fits what the student needs, providing what the student is unable to do independently, leaving the student to complete as much as possible. Scaffolding is reduced in step with the growing competence of the student – the more the student can manage, the less the teacher provides. Eventually, the student can complete the task autonomously. Examples of scaffolding language learning include modelling key language for a specific task, highlighting key ideas in a text through asking students questions, reducing the complexity ofa task, and helping a group of students work collaboratively by giving them specific roles. Training learners to use appropriate strategies for reading is another type of scaffolding.

28 Gibbons (2006).

With regard to paying attention to the language system itself and its particular forms and patterns (sound, vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics), research has found that explicit instruction, followed by practical repeated application, is particularly useful where there are differences between the students' first language and the target language and where the form itself is not easily noticed, such as stress patterns in English, the use of articles (*a, an, the*), or the choice of third person possessive determiner (*his* or *her*)[29]. For stress patterns, this could simply be clapping the beat on the main syllable of a multi-syllabic words, such as *comparative* (a physical and audio cue); or using hand movements to indicate pitch and stress (a physical cue); or highlighting the stressed syllable on the board (a visual cue). Teachers can train learners to use particular strategies to better understand underlying patterns in the target language. When students use these patterns in practice sessions they not only develop better understanding, but also learn to apply like strategies to other language forms.

DID YOU KNOW?

Young children are particularly good at learning implicitly based on large amounts of input they hear and see. However, from pre-adolescence upwards, learners start to make use of a developing ability to think about language (their metalinguistic ability), and can use explicit knowledge to help make sense of the language system. Researchers Joanne White and Leila Ranta (White, 2008) found that French-Canadian 12-year-olds learning English benefited from receiving simple explicit information about the possessive in English. The strategy of learning a rule of thumb when using the possessive ('Ask yourself whose ___ is it?'), helped learners to be more accurate as they practiced using this form. Drawing arrows to show what was referred to also encouraged understanding of how each system worked. (In English his / her refers to the possessor, but in French it refers to the gender of the possessed).

English:
'Bill and his mother ...'



French:
'Bill et sa mère ...'



The children were less confused when able to use the rule of thumb to help decide on the correct pronoun, and they could discuss and justify their choice with their peers as they practiced on examples. Using visuals of arrows and colours also made the gender marking more salient.

29 White (2008).

Such strategies assist learners to make the most of practice time. Training on peer collaboration can also help students make the most of working together[30]: The teacher plays an important role in developing a supportive learning environment in which students are able to work together with a high degree of mutuality, showing that they value one another's contributions irrespective of relative proficiency levels. Even younger students can be trained to provide support for one another through explicit instruction and modelling. For example, they learn to ask questions that elicit more ideas from their partners ('What do you mean?'; 'Why?'; 'What do you think?'), to negotiate difficulties in communication ('say that again?') and to provide feedback to their peers[31].

When students enjoy working with their peers in class, and feel supported and safe in their learning environment, they are much more likely to participate fully and be prepared to take the risk of making mistakes.



30 The Cambridge Life Competencies Framework may support teachers to systematically develop these skills in students.
31 Sato & Ballinger (2012); Philp (2016); Dörnyei & Malderez (1997).

What is important for instructed language learning?

The factors involved in effective language learning, outlined previously, suggest four key dimensions to be covered in any language course (Nation, 2007):


: **Meaning-focused input**


: **Meaning-focused output**


: **Language-focused learning**


: **Fluency development**



Developing comprehension

Some researchers[32] describe learning as largely implicit – something we do just by being exposed to large numbers of examples of the new language (as we do in fact for our first language(s)), as we saw in Figure 1. In this view, language learning is somewhat like building up a database of examples, and progressively making sense of the system the more examples we have. This is certainly part of how we learn: through language input, both spoken and written, by observing and experiencing how people interact and communicate. Indeed, we can't do without input, and lots of it! This is a significant challenge for second language learning contexts where target language input is not plentiful.



Developing the ability to communicate

Input alone, however, is insufficient: how do learners move from comprehending to actually communicating? Some applied linguists[33], looking at second language learning, note that it is in using language, through observation and trial and error, that learners start to really think about how the target language system 'works'. Having to produce language forces learners to go beyond the general understanding of key words and start to work out specific connections between forms and their meaning[34], that is, to see how phonological and grammatical forms communicate meaning, too.

For example, a student might first see a puzzling phrase 'in case of' in a reading exercise assigned for homework. The teacher in class may use an apparently similar phrase the next day several times 'in case you can't', 'in case I forget...' and the student hears it in its spoken form. Later in group work the same phrase may come up again. This time the student hears peers use it in context, and may then start to use it independently, perhaps stumbling over the pronunciation or not quite using it correctly for its meaning. These experiences all contribute to a growing understanding and use of particular language, whether vocabulary, grammar or phonology. Students may move from passively noticing a word without understanding it, to more active use. This then leads to modification of initial false ideas about its meaning or use.

32 e.g. N. Ellis, (2015); Krashen (1985).

33 For review see Mackey, Abbuhl & Gass (2012).
34 Swain (1995).

The same is true of grammatical and phonological forms. It is when learners start to use language in context that they focus more on the features of the language and how it works. We noted previously that implicit learning through exposure to language is a big part of developing an understanding of how the new system works. Paying attention is also crucial, however. Communicating with others provides a context in which learners may start to notice particular features of the target language: it is when learners hit problems, either in understanding or in trying to be understood, that they notice mismatches between the target language and their own version of it[35].

Becoming more accurate in use and knowledge

The term 'language-focused learning' (Nation, 2007) can be used to describe the action of paying conscious attention to specific features of language, whether written or spoken (this might range from simply noticing stress or intonation patterns in speech to working with a 'rule of thumb', as seen above). Paying attention helps learners to strengthen connections in memory, and in the case of language, it can strengthen the links we make between particular forms and the meanings they have[36]. Not just noticing, but also being required to do something with the input can further strengthen memory of that form. For example, for vocabulary, playing a card game of matching words with those of similar or opposite meaning involves processing the input at a deeper level. Continuing to revisit these features over intervals (e.g. playing the game again over subsequent days, a week later, a few weeks later...) further strengthens that memory. Thus, paying deliberate attention and practising those features is a means of developing greater accuracy in use, whether the focus is on pronunciation, grammar, pragmatics or vocabulary.

Becoming more automatic in our use of the target language

As is true of any skill, whether it is learning to write, read, ride a bike, follow a map or draw a picture, time on task is crucial: fluency only really comes through practice. It is through continuous use that we gradually build up speed and accuracy in a language. Through using the target language, we move from factual "knowledge about" the language to "procedural knowledge", in other words, when we are able to use language without having to rely on explicit rules, for example being able to automatically use 's' at the end of a verb referring to the action of a single person without thinking of the rule (e.g. "she sings well"). This applies to both receptive and productive skills – we get better at hearing and interpreting sounds that are new to us in a language, and we improve in our ability to pronounce those sounds more accurately and more quickly until it becomes automatic. In learning new words, we hear them or see them, start to pronounce them, and start to use them in context. In Figure 2 and other classroom examples in the next section, learners start off haltingly, with many false starts and errors, until eventually they can use forms without thinking about it. To develop fluency in a classroom setting, learners need time on task, continuing to productively use language they have used before, and reading and listening to texts that are already mostly familiar to them[37].

How do learners move from comprehending to actually communicating? It is in using language, through observation and trial and error, that learners start to really think about how the language system works.

What this suggests for teachers and course design is that students should experience a balance of all four different aspects of learning over their course: opportunities to receive meaning-focused input, opportunities to communicate through the target language, time spent focusing specifically on language form, meaning and use, and of course, time developing fluency in receptive and productive skills.

35 For review see Philp, Adams & Iwashita (2014).
36 Baars (1997); N. Ellis (2005).
37 Nation (2007).

Using a common topic over a unit of work is one way of building up familiarity with specific vocabulary or particular phonological or grammatical features. This provides possibilities for recycling and revisiting language through a range of different texts. Figure 2 below[38] represents two learners' experience in an adult English for Academic Purposes class, recorded by Katherine Cao over a four-week unit of work on health[39]. Through creating their own questionnaires and carrying out a school survey on a health related issue, the students ('Shu-Wei' and 'Jos')[40] gradually develop understanding and use of associated vocabulary and particular grammatical forms. We see them exposed to target language through a variety of experiences in class – they receive input by filling in a government health questionnaire, they hear their teacher talk about the questions, and gradually they start to produce that language themselves with varying success, and in different contexts (with the teacher, within pair work and delivering a class presentation)[41]. Meaning-focused input and output experiences as seen here in three of the four lessons in this unit, help to develop both language comprehension and production. When students strategically follow up these experiences with language-focused learning, this can promote greater accuracy and declarative[42] knowledge. Similarly, fluency-based activities can help develop greater automatic skill in language use and comprehension, and contributes to procedural knowledge[43]. In the following section we explore these four aspects in more detail.

The whole class fill in a health questionnaire – they see and hear examples of language they need later.

Students work in small groups. As they struggle to create their questionnaire, they discover problems and seek the teacher's expertise.

After collecting responses to their final questionnaire, they present the results in class, using the same language again, not quite accurately yet.

Lesson 1

FILLING IN A HEALTH QUESTIONNAIRE

Looking at language

T: [reading] "Have you had a drink containing alcohol in the last year, yes, go to 15", what does it mean?

T: all right, question number 4, "have you ever decided to quit smoking?"

S: No

T: Have you ever DECIDED to quit smoking

Sh: I have decide

T: What does that mean?

Lesson 2

SHU-WEI AND JOS CREATE A QUESTIONNAIRE

Shu-Wei asks the teacher for help

Sh: but can I ask if I want to say did you did you have ever (.) tried or

T: Have you ever

Sh: Have you ever tried or

T: plastic surgery

Sh: Yeah

T: Have you had

Sh: Had OK yeah yeah thank you, have you ever had any any plastic surgeries before OK

PEER CORRECTION AND CONFUSION

J: At what age have you gone the surgery?

Sh: Have you done have you done?

S: Gone

J: Its not Its not done because done is the one who the doctor done the surgery but you gone

Sh: Teacher, a question, its her and here, it will be like how many how many times did you do or have you gone

J: How many times have you gone

Lesson 4

PRESENTING THE RESULTS IN CLASS

Sh: the majority of them didn't had any um plastic surgeries before

Figure 2 — A unit on health issues

Key:

'Sh' = Shu-Wei
'J' = Jos
'S' = other unidentified student

38 Batstone & Philp (2013).
39 Cao (2009).
40 Pseudonyms given in the original research report (Cao, 2009).

41 Cao (2009), cited in Philp et. al (2014, pp. 192, 194). See also Batstone & Philp (2012).
42 Declarative knowledge refers to theoretical knowledge about something, e.g. a grammar rule.
43 Procedural knowledge refers to the practical knowledge we may not be able to explain but enables us to do something e.g. tie a shoelace.

Strategies to support effective language learning

1. Meaning-focused input

When teachers choose to use primarily the target language in the classroom, whether for the purpose of classroom management or for classroom activities, this provides opportunities for students to hear and see the target language used for different purposes, and helps to create an environment where use of the target language is expected. Given the predictability of many classroom management commands and requests, and the degree of repetition of particular language day-to-day, over time students can build up quite a repertoire of language they can understand. Figure 3 shows everyday language collected from English classes in two secondary schools in Croatia[44].

> You will be the first group.
>
> The trick now is to organize who will do what, don't let the same person do everything.
>
> Can you come and join? Next, girls.
>
> I'll give you maybe five minutes. What's the term?

Figure 3 — Classroom management in the second language classroom

As we saw in Figures 2 and 3, when students have to cope with language that is a little beyond their comprehension, this provides the opportunity to move further along in learning. This is only the case, however, if they have sufficient support to work out the meaning of the new language.

This support can come in many different forms, such as through pre-teaching of key words, providing context through images, through activating interest and knowledge of the topic, and by providing a specific purpose for listening or reading.

For example, in listening to a short story, students wouldn't be expected to understand all the words or details. Simply gaining the gist of the story is the first step towards their being able to work out particular parts they didn't understand before. Through the use of pictures, through familiarity with the main characters in the story and by pre-teaching key words that arise, students can piece together the meaning of the text. For many kinds of spoken and written texts, the use of 'information transfer activities'[45] can help students to identify key information and make sense of the overall meaning in spite of complex ideas and terminology, such as a description of a process (e.g. water purification), an explanation of a procedure (e.g. a recipe, or instructions). In such tasks, students fill in missing information on a table, chart, diagram or picture by writing a word or drawing ideas from the text. The provision of visual information reduces the burden of having to produce complex language, allowing the student to focus on the message and identify the meaning. Input activities can include texts such as oral stories, short extracts from a novel, personal experiences, a talk by a visitor, a sample travel brochure, a two-minute segment from a film or YouTube video reflecting everyday conversation (e.g. buying vegetables, meeting someone, asking directions).

44 Unpublished data, Mifka-Profovic & Philp (2016).

45 See Nation & Newton (2009).

When students have to cope with language that is a little beyond their comprehension, this provides the opportunity to move further along in learning.

2. Meaning-focused output

When teachers provide opportunities for learners to start to rely on their own language resources to communicate with others, learners can begin to engage with language in a new way. As for 'meaning-focused input', students are largely working with language that is already familiar to them. While their production of this language may not be fully on target, it is through expressing themselves using the target language system, however imperfectly, that they start to notice what they don't know, what they can and can't express well, and how the language fits together. We saw this previously in Figure 2, for example: the learners build up their ability to use new vocabulary terms and grammatical forms that they encountered in different ways through the various activities of a unit of work. While the students made many mistakes both in comprehension and in production, they steadily learn over time through a range of experiences in class and with different members of the class.

We can see that the two students, Shu-Wei and Jos, use a range of strategies to try to work out how to say what they want to say: they try out possibilities and think about the use of different verbs from other examples to work out the matching verb. Their learning is cumulative and gradual, developed both through peer work, in which they engage with problems of language use and benefit from target language examples from written resources, and through teacher input. It is important to note that this stage provides an opportunity for learners to try out language they are largely familiar with, and to push themselves further to find out how certain language is expressed. This allows them to notice when they hear or see a particular grammatical structure or lexical item expressed later in another context, perhaps by the teacher, another student, or in a text they later see or hear[46].

This is seen too in Figure 4 from a German mixed-age high school class from a study by Tomas Kos[47].

In this example, Gussi (8th grade) and Jossi (7th grade)[48] help one another by adding to each other's ideas as they reconstruct a text together. It is obvious that the two are enjoying working together, laughing and making jokes while staying on task. Their conversation reflects affiliation and ability to collaborate on the task. The social aspect of peer interaction, when students work well together, is a motivating factor that keeps them talking and trying to improve on their sentences.

Jossi: Ok. His parents didn't have a lot (reading)

Gussi: Jaaaa (in a funny tone)

Jossi: money so they couldn't spend

Gussi: hundreds=
^both involved in talking

Jossi: =hundreds (repeating) of dollars for smart clothes for their son.

Gussi: Na, das ist ja Schade. (that's a pity) (laughter)

Jossi: Some of the kids laughed at him but Rico was an alien... (laughter).
^enjoying making jokes

Gussi: Nee. (laughter)

Gussi: was intelligent

Jossi: more intelligent
^adding to each other's ideas

Gussi: ne, ach doch (no, I mean yes)

Jossi: more intelligent than many of the other kids in his school

Figure 4 — Peer work among German students learning English[49]

46 Batstone & Philp (2013).
47 Kos (2016).
48 Pseudonyms given in the original research report (Kos, 2016).
49 Kos (2016).

Opportunities for trying out new language together provide a significant context for enabling students to notice connections between form and meaning. Through peer interaction, learners have the chance to try out new language, to not be afraid to make mistakes, to puzzle over solutions and to contest one another's ideas in a way that isn't possible in teacher-student interaction due to the equality between the two peers[50]. Teachers play a vital supporting role in this, not only in being a source of consultation, but, critically, through ensuring viability of task, language, and social setting. The teacher is in a very good position to work out how to make the task relevant and engaging for their students, and to assess the language and knowledge required to succeed. This may involve some pre-teaching of vocabulary, or modelling, feedback and / or practice of key grammatical forms. In addition to building students' familiarity of required vocabulary, familiarity with key concepts involved in task content is also important to consider (as seen in Figure 2 above, from a unit on health issues).

Oral interactive tasks such as interviewing a partner about his / her experiences, creating a narrative together, discussing a particular topic, or providing instructions or directions in response to a partner's needs, all provide engaging contexts for students to communicate in the target language, whether spoken or written. In Figure 5[51], involving a pair of adult learners of English in Japan, one student recounts a personal story to her partner who is so interested that she asks a series of questions in order to understand what happened. Recent research suggests that learners' personal investment or interest in a task can foster deeper involvement in interaction, leading learners to try harder to communicate clearly[52]. Although the storyteller, Saki, pauses, often repeats herself and frequently makes mistakes, her partner, Ina helps her along, providing the correct word ('ambulance') and clarifying her intended meaning.



Saki: .. I couldn't get well, so I .. woke up woke my friends up, and tell.. tell her about my stomach ache, and .. it's it's really bad for me, so my friends call to 119 [emergency].

Ina: Oh, my...

Saki: And the am- ambrella?
^unsure of word

Ina: Ambulance.
^provides correct word

Saki: Ambulance. Come.. Came my hotel, and I was took to the hospital in Osaka. Yeah. I felt really bad. And, what, I don't know I don't know why I had bad stomach ache, 'cause I had the same food with my friends, but only I had a very bad stomach ache.
^repeats correct word

Ina: Did you eat something raw food?
^asks a question

Saki: No, maybe .. that .. only difference was .. uh, dinner? It or was con- convenience store's.
^ unsure of word

Ina: Oh, *convenience*. You bought you bought your
^provides correct word
dinner at at convenience store?

Figure 5 — Two Japanese students of English[53] engaged in recounting personal stories

50 Philp, Adams & Iwashita (2014).
51 Lambert, Philp & Nakao (2016).
52 Lambert, Philp & Nakao (2016).

53 Pseudonyms given in the original research report (Lambert, Philp & Nakao, 2016).

Research suggests that in these kinds of oral tasks, learners often make many errors – but the focus here is not accuracy. What is important is the opportunity for learners to put their resources into action by trying to communicate something that is meaningful to them. In such oral tasks, students tend to focus on lexical items or pronunciation rather than on grammatical form[54]. In contrast, collaborative tasks that involve a written component (e.g. creating a story, report, or questionnaire together) tend to encourage greatest focus on form (as we saw in Figure 2). This may push learners to try to articulate their ideas more carefully, and to pay attention to grammatical forms that are often non-salient. This kind of work may be followed up by work within language-focused learning.



3. Language-focused learning

Language-focused learning can be described as involving 'the deliberate learning of language features such as pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, grammar and discourse'[55]. Unlike meaning-focused output, there is a greater focus on accuracy. In this case, work can reflect the kind of intentional learning we associate with building up new knowledge about language, and developing habits that promote greater accuracy in use. Nation (2007) suggests the following examples: 'pronunciation practice, using substitution tables and drills, learning vocabulary from word cards, intensive reading, translation, memorising dialogues and getting feedback about writing' (p.6). This kind of focused attention on language, coupled with a focus on meaning, can help learners build up and consolidate receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. It can also provide strategies for developing more consistent grammatical accuracy.

It is important to emphasise that such work would ideally represent a much smaller portion of class time than the other three aspects discussed, each of which also involves time on task to build awareness of language features and increase accuracy, as well as developing implicit knowledge. In language-focused learning, in addition to deliberate work by the learner, explicit feedback provided by the teacher can help learners pay particular attention to specific areas. It can also provide direction as to how the learners might further develop their understanding autonomously.

Figure 6 illustrates language-focused learning. Two German teenagers are using English in a high school class, Lara (year 9) and Ella (year 8)[56]. Here they transform cartoon speech 'Sandy tells others that the mural looks great' into reported speech 'Sandy told others that the mural looked great' to recount the story of the cartoon. They assist one another in this, and depend on metalinguistic knowledge to think about the language, relying on their first language to do so.

Lara: Sandy tells others ...

Ella: told!

Lara: ja. (yes)

Lara: na ja look ist kein unregelmäßiges (well, look is not an irregular verb)

Ella: also looked

Lara: Sandy told others that the mural ... [writing the sentence down].

Ella: looked great

Figure 6 — Teenage learners help each other work out what to write

In addition to grammar, examples of language-focused learning of pronunciation might include the teacher raising awareness of intonation patterns in English, or listening and identifying specific phonemic contrasts in words. A focus on vocabulary might include group activities, such as finding collocations of a word and creating sentences to illustrate each use, developing a visual 'word family web' showing related words such as *create/created/creation/creative/creatively* and their use in sentences[57], or playing 'word dominoes' by adding suffixes to keywords for new meanings e.g. *un-kind, dis-taste-ful, pro-active*. An example of language-focused learning of pragmatics could involve selecting appropriate language to be used in contrasting scenarios, such as apologising, with language differing according to the misdemeanour and relationship to the injured party[58].

54 Philp et. al (2014).
55 Nation (2007: 6).
56 Kos (2016). Pseudonyms given in the original research report.
57 Students can check the British Council site to find word families: www.enchantedlearning.com/rhymes/wordfamilies
58 Halenko & Jones (2011).



4. Fluency development

Fluency development involves increased efficiency in all four skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing. As with meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output, developing fluency requires a focus on meaning, and involves use of language already familiar to the learners. For example, repetition of a speaking task can help learners to improve on their original attempts and consolidate their use of appropriate language to express their ideas[59]. In the pair task performed by the students in Japan, as seen in Figure 4 above, all students shared their story a second time with another student. Having a different audience meant the story was meaningful both times. Having several attempts on a task can provide opportunities for improved accuracy and use of more complex language[60].

According to Nation (2007), two other key elements in building fluency are quantity (more input and output) and time pressure, whether for receptive or productive skills. When developing fluency, students learn to cope with understanding more rapid speech through practice, learning to speak in 'real time' in conversation with others, reading with comprehension at greater speed and so on. This is an area in which learners can be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. They can develop their fluency by seeking opportunities to gain greater experience in using the target language either productively or receptively, through television, print, internet and social media, as well as by conversing with fluent speakers of the language where possible.

59 Bygate & Samuda (2005).
60 Bygate & Samuda (2005).

Concluding remarks

In this paper we have explored three questions: What does it mean to learn a language? What characterises a 'good language learner'? What can learners and teachers do to support learning a language in the classroom? This paper has suggested, on the basis of over 50 years of research on instructed language acquisition, that, while learners require rich exposure to new language forms, much of language learning is a cumulative process that requires working on familiar language in order to develop accuracy and fluency. Over the length of a language course, learners need a balance of experiences with the target language.

To summarise, this is made up of opportunities for:

- **Meaning-focused input:** Learners experience target language input a little beyond their comprehension yet within their ability to make sense of.
- **Meaning-focused output:** Learners might struggle to express their ideas or needs, yet manage to do so with help, making use of the linguistic resources they have already built up in their repertoire.
- **Language-focused learning:** Sometimes learners also need to pay deliberate attention to unfamiliar language features, whether through individual work, peer work, or teacher-direction instruction.
- **Fluency development:** Complementing the first three aspects is time spent building fluency in language that is already familiar but not yet automatic or accurate.

We have seen that the teacher plays a vital role in encouraging learners, in providing sufficient support during challenging tasks so that learners are pushed, yet successful. We noted too that 'good language learners' are self-motivated, so what are some ways that students take responsibility for their own learning?

The four aspects of learning encountered in the language class become mirrored in the autonomous work of the learner. For example, students can build up exposure to meaning-focused input by using the internet, watching television or films, listening to songs or spending time on extensive reading in the target language (whether this be blogs, social media, comic books, magazines, newspapers, novels or other books). The internet provides many possibilities for meaning-focused output, whether oral or written, through social media, gaming, or online dialogue, whether face-to-face or by text chat. Keeping a vocabulary journal, playing language games or practicing the use of new grammatical forms with a fellow student all provide opportunities to focus on language forms.

While learners require rich exposure to new language forms, much of language learning is a cumulative process that requires working on familiar language in order to develop accuracy and fluency.

Teachers support these practices by modelling strategies for coping with unfamiliar input, for negotiating problems in output and by providing feedback that highlights problem areas and encourages self-correction or further exploration by the learner. Ultimately, when teachers foster learner autonomy, and the ability to be self-regulated, they foster the possibility of lifelong learning and realisation for each learner's own aspirations for learning another language.

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