

First and other language acquisition: Activities for promotion of language learning across all levels



make literacy meaningful

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First and other language acquisition

One of the common inquiries in theories of language acquisition has to do with whether the process of learning a first language is similar or differs from the learning of other languages later in life. Understanding the similarities and differences between first language acquisition (from infancy onward) and the acquisition of second (or third, fourth languages ...) can be useful for all teachers. This article will discuss similarities and differences between the two processes of acquisition, followed by some ideas that take these points into account.

Similarities For many decades, there has been an extended belief that learners' errors should be corrected immediately as they might become fossilised as a permanent feature of their speech. Nowadays, errors are believed to be a natural part of the learning process and are seen as indicators of the development of the communicative competence. Therefore, the first thing teachers need to keep in mind is that making errors is not only common, it is an important part of language acquisition and therefore mistakes should be dealt with naturally.

Depending on the age and maturity of the learners, one of the first strategies a teacher can use regarding learner mistakes is to discuss them with students. They should understand that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process and that there is no need to correct each error made during language use. Teachers can also discuss ways and frequency that errors can be corrected, both individually or in group. A common strategy is for teachers to 'collect' common errors that are committed by the group (both written or spoken) that can then be corrected (and discussed if the students have enough maturity for metalinguistic comprehension) by the whole class. For instance, the teacher can invent a short essay that contains the most frequently committed mistakes and ask the students to act as teachers to correct the essay. Students might also self-correct video-taped oral production (at home or in pairs to ensure learners do not feel exposed to criticism).

Teachers might also allow students to decide whether they want to be corrected at all (according to the activity, learners may feel more confident than in other circumstances). Teachers can negotiate classroom signals (traffic light color strips on desks) which indicate to the teacher if the student wishes to be corrected in each

specific activity although it should also be understood that eventually the learners are working towards the ability to produce error-free texts and utterances.

The teacher also needs to know whether the learning task that the students are working focuses on accuracy or fluency. If students are involved in an open discussion then the focus is on fluency over accuracy whereas an oral presentation that has been prepared and practiced several times provides more opportunity for correction aimed at accurate use of the target language.

A second commonality for both processes –acquisition of first and other languages- is that the learner must know how to activate contextual cues in order to comprehend meaning. There are several activities that can promote this metalinguistic competence (see ideas below).

Differences

There are also some differences between first and other language acquisition. A primary difference is the amount and extent of exposure that occurs in first language acquisition. From the day they come into the world, children hear their first language and in their first years they are encouraged to babble and use language chunks (or what might be called telegraphic speech) long before they can form sentences. This long-term exposure is not always possible for other language acquisition.

This difference implies that the teacher must provide ample opportunities for comprehensible input for learners of other languages (known as $i + 1$: input that is comprehensible and just above the listener's language level). The teacher must provide extensive exposure to language use that integrates both familiar and new linguistic data that is not too difficult and promote situations where 'real-life' language use is encouraged (e.g. roles plays), so that students learning of the target language is perceived as useful and meaningful. Studies show that the rate and pace of language learning is also affected by the age of the learner (although this does not mean that all learners of the same age learn exactly alike). However, studies show that "young children are particularly good at learning [language] 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" (Philp, 2017, p. 7). Having this age factor in mind can also help teachers in deciding what kind of activities and scaffolding to provide, incorporating more explicit metalinguistic reflections as their students' age increases.

Another key difference between the two processes is the level of sensitivity to phonological distinctions to the language being learnt. Natural acquisition, from a young age, implies that the learner is very attuned to the continual presence of the language that permeates their environment and they are more keenly aware of phonetic distinctions inherent to that language. There are many well-known games that teachers can adapt to promote phonetic sensitivity. A few ideas are listed below.

Teaching ideas

Similar-sounds bingo

Learners may have problems detecting phonetic distinctions between similar sounds (known as minimal pairs; these are words that are almost exactly the same except for one different sound such as chip and cheap). This game aims to help students learn to distinguish these 'problem pairs'. The game requires attentive listening to each word in order to recognize which word is being called and also provides an opportunity for pronunciation practice as the bingo winner must repeat the five words in a row in order to complete the round.

This activity can give students the opportunity to hear the difference between the minimal pairs, recognize the different words written on the card and clearly pronounce the difference when they win and have a chance to be the caller. As each word is called, students tend to all say it quietly to themselves as well.

Word treasure hunt

teacher gives groups texts (oral or written) and the learners have to search for words they don't know. The instructions are to find the meaning of the unknown word in the clues that can be found in the surrounding text. Teachers can also prepare 'substitute' words on strips of paper that can be taped onto the more challenging words in the text. This not only helps the students learn new vocabulary it also raises their awareness of synonyms.

Focused reading (for extensive input)

Apart from regular classroom lessons that provide diverse input (e.g. culturally and socially relevant sources such as podcast, texts, videos, songs, etc.), teachers can set up regular story sessions that can have either very broad topics or sessions that adopt a narrow focus. A narrow focus means that the learners choose one topic of interest, with the idea of reading about the same subject through several different sources. This repetition helps build up background knowledge and at the same time, improves linguistic aspects related to the topic (e.g. lexical and grammatical).

Language focused learning task cycles

As Nation explains, language-focused learning (Nation, 2007) raises learners' awareness of and encourages learners to pay attention to specific features of language. For older or more advanced students, teachers can propose more complex task cycles that move students through different phases of language-focused learning: comprehension of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, leading to eventual fluency development (Philp, 2017).

Here is a very simple example of such a task cycle for advanced learners. In the first phase (meaning-focused input), students first listen to a short podcast and complementary reading text that talk about a key topic (e.g. equal pay and work conditions for male and female professional athletes). The students then interview each other about their viewing preferences of sports (sports associations have long argued that unequal pay is due to viewer demand, not institutional bias). This is followed by a short, prepared summary of the results, carried out in pairs or small

groups. This phase of meaning-focused output allows students ample time to think about and discuss with others how they want to express their ideas. Short presentations of the summaries can be recorded and the learners self or peer correct and rehearse again (this process can be repeated several times), thereby enhancing direct focus on their language use (also known as accuracy). Eventual contextualized, 'real' language use can be explored (fluency development) once learners feel motivated and confident enough. For example, the teacher could invite athletes to class to discuss these issues with the students or the students could take these issues to community members to talk about how to promote local female athletes (e.g. an awareness building campaign).

All these examples draw on a communicative approach to language learning and teaching, and more specifically on the principles of task-based language learning, which propose language learning by collaboratively doing specific tasks for real purposes, in this case, playing (and attempting to win) a game or debating a socially relevant theme.

Final Words: Acknowledging learners' diversity

Finally, it is important to remember that even though this text has started by discussing differences between first and other language acquisition, teachers must always remember that all students are different and no matter what language or languages they bring to the classroom, "it is unrealistic to expect any group of pupils whatever the ability to work through a body of work at exactly the same pace" (Bremmer, 2008, p. 2). This author points out that teaching mixed ability students begins by helping them to become effective learners. Some key ideas for supporting this process, according to Bremmer (2008) are pushing pupils "to think for themselves" (p. 3) and encouraging them to find their own resources and helping them understand their own learning pace. It is important that all the students in the class have opportunities to be sufficiently challenged so that they are not bored with the work and at the same time, given plenty of opportunities for learning from each other. Although it is not always an easy task, providing an enriching and creative learning environment can benefit all the learners. For more information, see the document called 'Creating an inclusive environment for language support'.

References

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