

Implementing Language Classrooms

Ads that read, “If you can speak it, you can teach it,” attracted thousands of young people to travel the world to teach ESL (English as a Second Language). English-language schools of the 1960s and 1970s flourished with the influx of native speakers who were given a scripted textbook with all the “right” things to say.

However, by the end of the 1970s, in a world that was rapidly becoming globalized, the need to communicate across language barriers had become critical. This would lead to the development of a completely new field of research that, in time, would change the way second-language classrooms operated, and to a large degree, the way students learned a new language.

In this article, we will examine some of the more salient aspects of research that have influenced our understanding of what language is and how a learner acquires a second language.

Knowing a Language

The Psalmist declares, “I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14, NKJV).¹ Perhaps one of the most distinguishing attributes with which God has endowed human beings is the innate ability to acquire language, and then to communicate their thoughts and feelings with others.

For centuries, researchers have been fascinated with how children, without any

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formal instruction, acquire language from their environment. According to researchers, this process of language acquisition, or language absorption, begins in the first few weeks of life, and continues until the age of 5 or 6.² As young children attend to their environment, they begin to make associations between the sounds they hear and the actions and movements they see. In time, the cooing and babbling give way to attempts at forming sounds into words. Miraculously, young children are able to converse fluently in their native language and to form more complex structures that reflect adult speech.³

Thus, learning one’s native language in the early years of childhood is primarily accomplished unconsciously and intuitively from the child’s environment.

Even young speakers of English are able to distinguish between sound units of words, such as *dog* and *cat*, and to unconsciously and coherently construct and reconstruct correct phrases and sentences, even though they cannot fully explain the rules for doing so.⁴ For example, most speakers of English, when using more than one adjective to describe something, have little difficulty saying *the big, blue car*. They know innately that one does not say *the blue, big car*, even though they may not be able to give a plausible reason for the preferred word order. Japanese speakers as well, without hesitation, know that one can give a compliment by saying *oisbi-soo* (looks delicious), or *o-genki-soo* (looks healthy), but are careful when using *kawaii-soo* (not looks cute, but what a pity).

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vocabulary are not tested directly, it is assumed that a student at a particular level will have the ability to use the appropriate grammar and vocabulary to satisfy the standards.

This is not to say, however, that in language classrooms some analysis of the language, especially in academic-based teaching, is not beneficial. However, when ESL instruction focuses primarily on the communicative aspects of the language (listening, reading, writing, and speaking), and the grammar remains in the periphery, students are more likely to acquire the rules

Acquisition

the exact time and situation in which they are spoken. It also means being able to understand the uniqueness of the language that one hears. We know instinctively what belongs to our language and what does not belong.⁵

Principles of Language Teaching

As second-language research has provided extensive evidence in support of more implicit communication-based instruction, grammar-based methodologies, such as the Grammar-Translation Method, the Audiolingual Method, and the Direct Method, for the most part, have been abandoned. Although research is still providing new theories, several significant theories have emerged over the years that are worth discussing.

Accuracy vs. Fluency

Communication-based classrooms tend to focus on developing actual communication, emphasizing the need for linguistic fluidity and spontaneity in using the language, rather than trying to develop native-speaker accuracy.

In the past, speaking like the natives was the goal for most language learners as they entered their course of study. However, research is indicating that learners, at any given stage of development, may be accurate according to their level of achievement, while not necessarily accurate when being evaluated in terms of native-speaker fluency. According to Richard-Amato, "it is unrealistic to expect second language learners to be 'native.'"⁶ This is especially true if we try to decide which variety of English is, in fact, native. The British as well as the Americans, the Australians, and even the Canadians would all argue that their variety of English is "native."

In recent years, the Educational Testing Services (ETS)⁷ has recognized the need to develop a new format for their Test Of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) that reflects how a learner communicates in a second language. The new format, referred to as the Internet-based Test (iBT), focuses on testing a student's ability to communicate in the areas of listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Although grammar and vo-



of the language.⁸ This type of teaching is not unstructured; on the contrary, it is based on principles that can be adapted and adjusted to the varying situations and needs that second-language teachers face daily in the classroom.

Language in Before Language out

Perhaps one of the most logical and yet most overlooked principles is the need for *language in before language out*. A learner must be able to comprehend a language before he or she can acquire the ability to produce that language. Students who are exposed to language that is rendered comprehensible by its context and hints about meaning can more readily "absorb" how that language is constructed. Some researchers⁹ have even strongly suggested that second-language learners who read for pleasure and focus on understanding the meaning are able to "absorb" unconsciously how the target language flows and develops grammatically. When such learners attempt to speak or

write, they have already processed the language on an input level.

In balance, language that is first “absorbed” tends to be more readily processed, as learners have had opportunity to gain an intrinsic feel for how the words flow. Later, when learners begin to explore and create the target language on their own, more explicit grammatical instruction can be beneficial, reinforcing the assumptions that were made in the earlier stages of acquisition.

Possibly one of the most important contributions to the field of English-language learning was a program developed by Ashley Hastings,¹⁰ a now-retired professor of TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) from Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia. Based on the concept of *language in before language out*, the program provides opportunities for learners to develop listening skills before reading, reading skills before writing, and writing skills before speaking. With no expectations of producing language before comprehending it, students are able to progress more rapidly than if required to speak or write while they develop listening and reading skills.

Authentic Material

Another crucial principle for language acquisition is the authenticity of classroom materials. Scripted language, frequently found in older ESL textbooks, to a large degree tends to rely on unnatural, and somewhat manipulated, language structures in the form of dialogues, exercises, and even drills. Authentic material, on the other hand, tends to preserve the reality and plausibility of native language in its natural context. Although passages may be simplified to render them comprehensible, the authenticity is preserved by focusing on meaning rather than structure.

In a communication-based classroom, where authentic materials are used, learners are able to connect the materials and activities with their real-world counterparts. H. D. Brown notes, “Authentic language and real-world tasks enable students to see the relevance of classroom activity to their long term communicative goals. By introducing natural texts . . . rather than concocted, artificial material, students will more readily dive in to the activity.”¹¹ In other words, what happens in the classroom must be applicable to the real-world interactions outside of the classroom in order to be effective.

Task-Based Teaching

One of the best methods for developing continuity and relevancy in ESL classrooms is to incorporate tasks that focus on accomplishing learner goals and are based on stu-

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dent needs and interests. When students are assigned a task with easy-to-follow guidelines, the focus of the class tends to shift from the structure of the language to the communication of ideas, thoughts, and opinions. Tasks can be easily developed by considering learner goals and interests, and finding materials suited for the appropriate level of listening, reading, writing, or speaking. The Internet provides an excellent source for each of these areas. Do a Google search and select appropriate and relevant materials from reliable sites. Look for educational sites that can provide online learning videos, or clips that can be downloaded and burned onto a DVD. One such Internet site is the Discovery Educational Channel, which contains hundreds of videos suitable for K-12 in all the main subject areas.

Challenges of Learning a Language

Even if all the right principles are followed, the anxiety levels of English language learners can interfere with potential progress. It’s important to decrease their stress¹² in order to build confidence and create a safe place for learning. Learners must develop an “I can do it” attitude to overcome their feelings of vulnerability as they attempt to acquire a new language and—to a large degree—a new identity.

Real Issues

English language learners face a number of issues in attending North American schools. When entering an English-speaking school for the first time, ELLs are often excited about being in the new environment with its exotic sights and sounds. However, this excitement often gives way to feelings of despair or even anger as they face the awkwardness of functioning in a



foreign environment with a limited understanding of their surroundings.

In their home country, these students could interact effortlessly with family and friends, but in the new environment with new standards of conduct and communication, feelings of loneliness or isolation may hinder their attempts to participate in normal school functions. English language learners may even find simple school interactions, such as dropping or adding a class, or correcting an absence or tardiness so intimidating that they may hesitate to tackle the task.



Potential for Misunderstanding

Educators with limited exposure to different cultures and ways of thinking may believe that students from other cultures suffer from a short attention span or from some learning disability—and in some cases, this may be true. However, more often than not, their inability to stay on task or understand simple classroom instructions is not a cognitive dysfunction, but rather a normal reaction to a strange environment. When second-language learners are placed in ESL classrooms with other ELLs, their behavior is often notably different. No longer are they shy or withdrawn. With their anxiety levels lowered, they are, more often than not, able to function quite normally and become achievers.¹³

Stereotyping

Throughout the world, members of different cultures have preconceived notions about the parameters for appropriate behavior. When behaviors fall outside these parameters and cannot be interpreted as fitting the expected norm, the result is often subtle jabs that attempt to force people back toward accepted norms. For example, stereotyping by native speakers tends to inhibit the language acquisition process for ELLs. Subtle remarks, even slight glances and “little” nuances can send the message that foreign students are weird or offensive, and suggest to ELLs that “your culture is not accepted here.”

As educators, we often see students treated in hurtful ways by their peers. This is especially true with language learners who, when under pressure, tend to retreat to their own language groups. We can help international students adjust to new cultural mores and even integrate into the “in-group” by simply taking time to express our understanding and acceptance of their ways and making polite suggestions about how to adapt to the customs of their new country. Then, in turn, they will tend to be more accepting of our notions of how society should be run.

Conclusion

Language instruction can no longer be thought of in terms of, “If you can speak it, you can teach it,” a concept that earlier fueled young people to travel the world. The field has earned, in the 21st century, a rightful place of its own as a profession. As a mission-driven people, it is our privilege to take advantage of the knowledge with which God has blessed our world regarding the ways language is acquired. Placed in the context of the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, to take the gospel

“to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people,” this knowledge, rightly used, can enable members to reach across language and cultural barriers with the “gift of tongues.” ✍



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