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APPLYING LINGUISTICS TO THE ADULT ESOL CLASSROOM: A GUIDE FOR ESOL TEACHERS IN COMMUNITY
CENTERS

by

LENORE SLOTA COSTELLO

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Linguistics in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2023

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APPROVAL

Applying Linguistics to the Adult ESOL Classroom: A Guide for ESOL Teachers in Community Centers

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Applying Linguistics to the Adult ESOL Classroom: A Guide for ESOL Teachers in Community Centers

by

Lenore Slota Costello

Advisor: Alberta Gatti

Many community centers in urban areas of the United States offer English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) classes to adults. This thesis is intended as a resource for teachers of those classes, so that they may make pedagogical decisions that are informed by Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research findings on how languages are learned. The thesis is designed for teachers with and without formal background in ESOL or linguistics. Each chapter introduces an SLA concept that pertains to instructed SLA: (1) the natural order hypothesis, (2) mental representation and interlanguage, (3) the role of input in acquisition, (4) the output hypothesis, and (5) the role of corrective feedback in the classroom. Each chapter concludes with concrete suggestions on how to apply the concept explained in the classroom.

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Introduction

Who Is the Intended Reader for This Text?

This thesis, I hope, could be helpful to many different kinds of second language teachers. That being said, I've written it with a specific group in mind: English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) teachers who teach adults at community centers in the United States. I use the term "community center" broadly here, to also encompass libraries and other nonprofit organizations that serve the public for free or minimal cost.

This audience may seem unnecessarily specific. Why not just write a thesis for all ESOL teachers in general? Or perhaps a thesis for all ESOL teachers who teach adults?

The reason is that many such books already exist. However, in my experience, it can be difficult to adapt them to the community center classroom environment. Many ESOL books assume a much higher level of proficiency than that which is found in community center classes. These books may also assume that all students have been formally educated and have had uninterrupted educations. Books that do assume a lower level of proficiency and/or formal education are often aimed at children, and their content would be inappropriate in an adult classroom. The research I discuss in this thesis will apply to almost any language teacher, since it concerns language learners in general. However, when I discuss specific practical choices that teachers can make, I will be doing so in the context of the community center classroom.

This thesis is an attempt to bridge the gap between the research in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and the day-to-day practices of teaching ESOL. We will not, of course, be able to discuss all aspects of SLA—this would be overwhelming and unhelpful. However, I have selected a few major points that I think are most relevant to teachers of adult students, especially beginner adult students. I will discuss these points at the end of this introduction.

Meet Maria and Her Class

Some of the research in the upcoming chapters is related to topics that are abstract and complex. In order to clearly connect these topics to the everyday classroom, I will be using the example of Maria, a fictitious ESOL teacher who just finished her first three months of teaching “Beginner English” at the local community center. We will use her as an example, to see what is done in a typical ESOL classroom, and what adjustments we can make—based on decades of SLA research—to strengthen the teaching and learning that goes on there.

In the next section of this introduction, we will look at a sample class from her first three months of teaching, and we’ll examine what issues she and her students struggled with in the classroom. Then, in the chapters that follow, we’ll look at how SLA research relates to Maria’s lessons and what concrete changes Maria can make.

First, let’s get acquainted with Maria’s class.

Maria has just finished her first quarter of teaching a beginner class. The class was two hours long, and it met twice a week, for twelve weeks. Roughly twelve to fifteen students regularly showed up to class. Her students came from all over the world and spoke a variety of languages. While some had college or high school degrees, many of her students did not complete high school in their home country or in the United States. All of them had basic literacy in their first languages.

In addition to having a variety of educational experiences, her students also display a great range of oral ability in English. In the beginning of the quarter, some of them knew very few words and phrases beyond “hello” or “thank you,”—what the [ACTFL proficiency Guidelines 2012](#) call “Novice” (ACTFL, 2012)— but others were able to communicate in sentences-level discourse about familiar topics— “Intermediate” in the ACTFL scale.

Maria's employer did not articulate any specific goals regarding what she should teach. However, at the beginning of the quarter, Maria herself had some loose expectations about what her students would be able to do by the end of the quarter. She expected they would be able to:

- Comprehend and respond to other English speakers, such as neighbors and co-workers, in brief conversations about topics that Maria and many of her students consider to be “everyday, familiar topics.” This means being able to understand and provide basic facts about identity (introductions, likes and dislikes), talking about everyday routines, shopping for food and clothes, and local directions.
- Speak about these “everyday topics” without making errors that interfere with communication.
- Speak fluently as much as possible—that is, speak without thinking.

To achieve these goals, Maria's curriculum is designed around the explicit teaching of selected grammar structures and vocabulary that she believes are integral to the aforementioned “everyday topics.”

As you read through the description of Maria's class below, consider:

Do her lesson plans, classroom exercises, and homework assignments align with her goals (that is, will they help her students meet her expectations by the end of the quarter)?

An Average Day in Maria's Class

Let's take a look at a sample of one of Maria's classes from the tenth week of class. Her class begins at 6:00pm and ends at 8:00pm.

Homework Review

After greeting the students and taking attendance, Maria begins by reviewing the homework that was due on this day: Students had to complete two worksheets which focus on “the simple past,” the topic that she covered in the previous class. The first worksheet asks students to write a sentence, using the past tense, based on a corresponding picture and verb in parentheses. See below for an example.

Directions: Write a sentence in the past tense, using the picture and the verb in parentheses as a guide.

Example:



(Cook)

Answer: They cooked yesterday.

Figure 1: Excerpt from Maria's first homework worksheet. Photo Source: Jimmy Dean on Unsplash.com

Maria calls on various students to share their sentence for each picture. She writes each past-tense sentence on the whiteboard at the front of the class, and then asks follow-up questions related to the verb in the sentence. For example: “The people in the picture are cooking tomatoes. What else can we cook?”

The second worksheet asks students to re-write sentences from the present tense into the past tense.

See below for an example.

Directions: Re-write the sentence so that it is in the past tense.

Example: I run three miles every day.

Answer: I ran three miles yesterday.

Figure 2: Excerpt from Maria's second homework worksheet.

Maria again asks various students to share their answers and writes their responses on the board. In total, reviewing both worksheets takes roughly 30 minutes.

“New Grammar” and Practice Exercises

At about 6:30pm, Maria begins the “new grammar” segment of her lesson, where she introduces a new grammatical feature to her students. She generally tries to introduce something new in each class. On the board, she writes “Yes/No Questions in the Past Tense” and passes out a reference sheet to each student. See below for the first three examples on the sheet.

<u>Yes/No Question</u>	<u>Response</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you watch a movie on Sunday? 	Yes, I did. No, I didn't watch a movie.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did John go to the store? 	Yes, he did. No, he didn't go to the store.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did Mary and John take the train? 	Yes, they did. No, they didn't take the train.

Figure 3: Excerpt from Maria's in-class handout about answering past-tense yes/no questions.

On the board, Maria writes the following, copying the first line of the reference sheet.

<i>Did you watch a movie on Sunday?</i>	<i>Yes, I did.</i>
	<i>Yes, [Subject] + did.</i>

Figure 4: Maria's in-class whiteboard notes about answering past-tense yes/no questions affirmatively.

She tells her students, “When giving a ‘yes’ answer to a yes/no question, the answer will always be in the format of ‘yes, subject + did.’ This is true for all subjects, whether it's ‘I,’ ‘you,’ ‘he,’ etc.”

Maria then writes a negative answer to the question. See below.

Did you watch a movie on Sunday?	Yes, I did. Yes, [Subject] + did.
	No, I didn't watch a movie. No, [Subject] + verb.

Figure 5: Maria's in-class whiteboard notes about answering past-tense yes/no questions affirmatively and negatively.

She tells students that this is how we form a negative response to a yes/no question in English, and that negative responses also use the same format for all subjects.

Then she informs the students that they will “practice speaking by asking and answering yes/no questions.” She divides the students into groups of two or three, and hands each group a small stack of index cards with yes/no questions on them, for example, “did you cook last weekend?” and “did you work yesterday?” The students spend roughly ten minutes asking and answering these questions with each other. Maria circulates the room during this time, stopping for a few minutes at each table. When students make errors, she gently corrects them, as you can see in the examples below:

Student 1 (reading from the card): Did you watch a movie last week?

Student 2: Yes.

Maria: Oh, actually, it should be "yes, I did."

Student 2: Ah...Yes, I did.

Student 3 (reading from the card): Did you work yesterday?

Student 4: Uh, no. *¹No work.

¹ When a sentence is marked by a preceding asterisk, it indicates that the sentence is not well-formed, that is, it is ungrammatical.

Maria: Ah, remember, it's "No + subject + verb," so it's "No, I didn't work."

Student 4: Oh, ok.

Maria (expectantly): So...?

Student 4: *No, uh...I didn't...worked.

Maria: Ok, good try!

At times, more advanced students will also help less advanced students:

Student 5: Did you go to the park last week?

Student 6: Yes, I go to the park.

Student 5: Um. You need to do past tense: "Yes, I went to the park."

Student 6: Ah, yes, ok. Yes, I went to the park.

When the students finish, Maria collects the cards. She then gives them a break of 12 minutes, asking them to return to class at 7:10pm.

Culture

When the students are back from break, Maria moves on to the "cultural" segment of her class. She passes around a few photos she has printed out of The Beatles and asks students if they recognize them. Some students do, though most are not very familiar with their music. Maria gives a brief introduction of The Beatles ("These photos are of The Beatles. They were a famous rock band in the 1960s and are still popular in the U.S. today...").

She then shows them that she has plugged her smartphone into a portable music speaker. She says, "we're going to listen to a song by The Beatles, called 'Hello, Goodbye'." She hands out index cards pre-printed with very short snippets of the song's lyrics. Three examples of the cards are below.



Figure 6: Maria’s index cards with lyrics from The Beatles’ song “Hello, Goodbye”.

She asks the students to stand in the back of the room, in a U-shape, and listen to the song. When they hear the lyrics that are printed on their cards, they must hold up their card until that lyric is done. She plays the song, and the students follow her instructions. Some of them miss their cues or hold up the wrong cards, but others are able to do the activity accurately. At the end, Maria claps, and the rest of the class joins her in clapping, as they all go back to their seats.

Reading Comprehension

Maria then passes out the final exercise of the day, which is a page-long reading about popular winter activities that take place in New York City, where her students live (“In December, many people enjoy ice skating at Rockefeller Center in Manhattan.”). She asks students to each read 1-2 sentences of the reading out loud, and occasionally corrects their pronunciation by repeating the word they mispronounced slowly and clearly. There are questions at the end of the reading (“On what day is the Rockefeller tree lighting this year?”), and she calls on various students to answer them orally.

Wrap-Up

There are now ten minutes left to class. Maria hands out the homework sheets for next class (two worksheets related to the subject of yes/no questions). Then, she wraps up by asking her students what they learned today. She writes every answer she gets on the board (“The past tense of ‘run’ is ‘ran’,” “people ice skate in Manhattan,” etc.). One student remarks, “*I learn people Christmas shopping Fifth

Avenue.” Maria gently corrects him, saying, “People like to go Christmas shopping on Fifth Avenue,” which she writes on the board. The student responds, “*Yes, Fifth Avenue have many store.”

Once a few more students have given responses about what they’ve learned, Maria smiles and bids them all goodbye until next class.

Maria’s Big Question

All students must take an English assessment, administered by the ESOL staff at the community center, at the beginning and end of each quarter. The assessment is a commercially available product that tests oral English ability and is administered via computer software. The assessment displays one question at a time that the assessment administrator reads to the student, and the questions generally advance in difficulty as the student progresses.

The assessment questions are very different from most of the exercises and activities that Maria’s students engage in for her class, in that the assessment questions are conversational and open-ended. By contrast, the exercises and activities for Maria’s class are often formulaic and generally focus on students practicing explicit grammar rules (for example, when asking students to convert present-tense sentences into past-tense sentences).

When the assessment is over, Maria sees that her students’ scores, on average, have not improved very much since before they took her class. Most students haven’t improved enough for them to move up to the next course level.

Maria is not surprised, as she administered some of these assessments on her own students during class and saw that many of them still make errors on various aspects of grammatical features that she has taught them in the previous quarter. For example, a student mentioned that he had lived briefly in Texas before coming to New York, and she asked him if he liked living there. The student responded, “*Yes...yes, I like.” Maria was baffled, since, as we saw, she told her students that the correct response

to a yes/no question like this would be “Yes, I did.” She is unsure of what more she could have done to teach them this form—she gave her students speaking exercises (with the prompts on the cards) as well as homework sheets on this topic.

Maria also noticed that many of her students used the present tense while talking about the past (“*Yesterday I see my daughter”) and left off the third person “s” (“*She really love to read.”).

As a result of their low scores, the majority of her students are scheduled to return to her beginner class next quarter. While it’s certainly possible that the assessment is underestimating her students’ abilities, the fact is that Maria also feels that her students are no more proficient in English now than when they began her class.

Why is this happening? It’s clear that Maria is dedicated to her students. She comes prepared with multiple worksheets and is intentional about incorporating both speaking and listening exercises in class. She corrects her students gently and tries to do “fun” and unconventional activities in class, such as listening to The Beatles. Likewise, her students work hard, and want to learn English. Many of them are consistent about doing their homework.

So, Maria wonders, why are her students’ assessment scores so low? Shouldn’t they be moving up to the next level by now? These questions, and others, will be answered by the rest of this thesis.

How SLA Research Can Help Maria

In the rest of this thesis, I will discuss SLA research that pertains to what is happening in Maria’s classroom. At the end of each chapter, I will discuss practical steps Maria can take to better align her class with the principles of the research.

- Chapter 1: The Natural Order Hypothesis

ESOL teachers sometimes spend time teaching features of English that are too advanced for their students. Adult learners of English generally learn features of English in a predictable order. That is, they usually learn certain features of English before others. In this chapter, I will discuss this order and the variances that may occur within it, so that teachers like Maria can adjust their expectations of their students' development accordingly.

- Chapter 2: Implicit Knowledge vs. Explicit Knowledge

In the classroom, Maria spent time explaining “grammar rules” to her students—as do many real-life ESOL teachers. Often times, the result of this focus is that a student may understand the grammar rule itself but be unable to apply it consistently when producing language, as was the case for Maria’s students. In this chapter, I will explain why teaching grammar rules often does not result in language development, and the processes through which language does develop.

- Chapter 3: Input

Many ESOL teachers know that their students must be exposed to “real-life English.” In Maria’s case, she tried to do so through songs and readings. However, it can be difficult to judge what kind and how much of “real-life English” is needed in the classroom. In this chapter, I will explain why *input* (language that the learner hears or sees that has communicative intent (VanPatten et al., 2019)) is so crucial for acquisition. I will also discuss what kind of input is useful in aiding acquisition, and how to identify that kind of input so that you may introduce it in your classroom.

- Chapter 4: Output

In her class, Maria tried to ensure that her students had the opportunity to practice speaking English. Unfortunately, the speaking exercises that took place in her

classroom—and those that take place in many other real-life classrooms—did not result in students being able to fluently speak English outside the classroom. In this chapter, I will explain why many common speaking activities done in class are insufficient for acquisition and explain the characteristics of activities that do promote acquisition.

- Chapter 5: Corrective Feedback

Maria corrected her students in class, but her corrections sometimes went unnoticed by the students. In this chapter, we'll explore different ways of correcting errors, and the circumstances in which correcting errors might be most helpful for your students.

Chapter 1: The “Natural Order”

In the introduction, we observed a typical day in Maria’s class and the assessment that her students took at the end of the quarter. During this assessment, many of her students made errors on various aspects of grammatical features that she had taught them in the previous quarter, and Maria could not find an explanation for why this happened. In this chapter, I will discuss some of the research in the field of SLA that may help explain why her students made errors on these features.

Students Must Be Ready to Learn

The reason Maria’s students can’t acquire some of the grammatical features she teaches is because they likely aren’t *ready* to acquire those features at the time that she is teaching them in class. This doesn’t necessarily mean that those features are “complicated” in the sense of how hard they are to explain—indeed, the explanation of these features might seem fairly easy and straightforward, even to students like hers who have limited exposure to literacy. However, the simplicity of a textbook rule does not equate to how easy it is to acquire.

What do I mean by *ready to learn*? “Readiness” is related to the fact that learning is controlled by unconscious internal mechanisms in our mind. Those mechanisms interact with *input*, that is, language that the learner hears or sees that has communicative intent (VanPatten et al., 2019) (we will talk more about input in [Chapter 2](#) and [Chapter 3](#)). Being “ready” to learn a new grammatical feature is therefore an internal status that cannot be altered by curriculum or teaching methods.

In language learning, these internal mechanisms work according to their own schedule. Much like a newborn baby who cannot be rushed to walk independently before he’s ready (he must develop the proper coordination skills and muscle strength first (WebMD Editorial Contributors, 2021)), a language learner will learn the target language according to the schedule of his internal mechanisms. As you will

see, this internal schedule tends to be similar for most learners, just as most children learn to walk independently and achieve other developmental milestones at roughly the same age.

The Natural Order

Research demonstrates that “the acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order” (Krashen, 2009, p. 12) which, for English forms, is shown below. This order represents a *general tendency* of learners to acquire certain features before others. Research shows that this order exists for classroom learners as well as those who learn the language “naturalistically” through immersion. Children who learn English as their first language also tend to follow a predictable order, though the order is somewhat different from children and adults who learn English as a second language¹ (Krashen, 2009).

The Natural Order

The following sequence is adapted from Stephen Krashen (2009).

Stage 1:

- “ing”
- Plural
- Copula “be”

Stage 2:

- Auxiliary “be”
- Articles (a, the)

Stage 3:

- Irregular Past

¹ Krashen (2009) refers to this as “the order of acquisition for second language” (p. 13), so that is the wording I am using here. However, it may be the case that some learners already speak a different second language and are learning English as their third (or fourth, or fifth, etc.) language.

Stage 4:

- Regular Past
- 3rd person singular
- Possessives

What these stages represent is that, in general, an adult learner will acquire all features in Stage 1 (the “ing” ending, pluralization, and be able to consistently use the copula “be”) before that learner is ready to acquire the third person singular “s”, a stage 4 feature.

The order above—hereafter referred to as the “natural order”— was postulated after many research studies found that learners followed similar paths in their acquisition of English *morphemes*².

Morphemes are words, or parts of words, that have meaning. For example, the word “dog” is both a word and a morpheme meaning “a highly variable domestic mammal (*Canis familiaris*) closely related to the gray wolf” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). However, the word “dogs” has two morphemes: “dog” (“a highly variable domestic mammal (*Canis familiaris*) closely related to the gray wolf”) and “s” (meaning “many”). Since the pluralizing “s” adds meaning to the word “dogs”, it is referred to as a morpheme as well.

Generally, when we talk about morphemes in language acquisition, we are less interested in morphemes that are themselves words (such as “dog”) and more interested in the morphemes that are *parts* of words (such as the pluralizing “s”).

Factors That May Affect the Natural Order

The morpheme order shown on pages 14-15 is generally considered to be the order in which most adult English learners acquire those morphemes. It would be reasonable to believe that this order could be

² For more on the topic of morphemes, please see the “Suggested Reading” section at the end of this chapter.

changed by enough effort from the students or by targeted instruction from the teacher. However, this belief is incorrect, because *the order of acquisition cannot be changed, as it is not dependent on effort or on instruction, but on unconscious, internal mechanisms that cannot be altered*, as stated above.

For many teachers, this may seem counterintuitive at first. Surely enough studying of a late-stage feature should enable a learner to acquire it! But, as we will see in the next section of this chapter, that’s not the case. No one is exactly sure why this particular order exists for English (different languages have different orders of acquisition, as we’ll see in the next section), but the order exists.

The most likely explanation lies in how *salient* the grammatical feature in question is. *Salient* refers to how easy it is for a listener or reader to perceive that feature in the input. Jennifer Goldschneider and Robert DeKeyser (2001) found five different factors that all contribute to the degree to which a grammatical feature may be considered “salient.” Those factors are:

1. *Perceptual Saliency*: How easy is it to hear or perceive the grammatical feature? For example, the “ing” ending of “jumping” may be easier to hear than the “s” ending of “jumps.”
2. *Semantic Complexity*: How many different meanings does this grammatical feature express? For example, the third person “s” connotes three meanings: person, number, and present tense. The plural “s”, however connotes only one meaning: number.
3. *Morphophonological Regularity*: Does the grammatical feature change its sound, based on which words are around it? For example, the plural “s” can have 3 different sounds, depending on the word it is pluralizing. “Dogs,” “cats,” and “horses” all contain the plural “s,” but the sound of that “s” is different for each.

4. *Syntactic Category*: Is the grammatical feature related to *content words*³ (words that express meaning such as “book” or “run”) or *functional words* (words that express grammatical relationships, such as “do” in “do you like coffee?”)? And, is it *free* (can the morpheme stand alone as the word “the” in “the dog” is able to) or is it *bound* (must the morpheme be connected to a word, such as the possessive “s” in “Mary’s dog”)? Grammatical features related to *content words* are generally acquired before those classified as *functional words*. Within those categories, features that are classified as *free* are acquired before those that are classified as *bound*.
5. *Frequency in the Input*: How often is this grammatical feature heard in the language that the learner is exposed to? For example, the possessive “s” may be used less frequently than the definite article “the” and may therefore be less frequent in the learner’s input.

Goldschneider and DeKeyser found that these five factors, in combination, strongly affected how likely a feature was to be acquired early or late. They were also quick to note that there is a high degree of intercorrelation of the five characteristics, and that therefore it was difficult to determine any one factor as the most important causal factor.

The Natural Order in Other Languages: The Case of German

Evidence for the natural order exists not only in English but in other languages, as well. Jurgen M. Meisel, Harald Clahsen, and Manfred Pienemann (1981) studied migrant workers in Germany whose native languages were either Spanish, French, or Italian. Specifically, they investigated the order in which these German learners acquired three particular word order rules. They found that the learners generally adhered to the same order, despite not being in any classroom together (they were “naturalistic” learners).

³ Content words are sometimes also referred to as *lexical* or *lexical items*.

An interesting finding was that one particular rule in this developmental sequence is quite similar to a rule in Spanish and Italian (it requires that the subject and verb are inverted in certain circumstances). However, this rule was still the *second* rule that was acquired by speakers of these languages, instead of being the first. The *first* rule that was acquired shared no such similarity with the learners’ native languages. As mentioned earlier, our own intuition about what is “simple” for our learners may not always be accurate.

It should also be noted that researchers found some variation among learners. Some learners did not acquire a rule “perfectly” before moving on to the next stage, that is, they may still have made infrequent errors in certain contexts while using the rule. Additionally, all learners did not progress at the same rate.

To investigate whether or not this order of acquisition could be altered or impacted by formal instruction, Rod Ellis (1989) compared the acquisition order of two different groups: The first group was made up of migrant workers in Germany who were learning German naturalistically, and the second group was made up of students studying German in classrooms in London, England.

It should be noted that there were many differences between the learners in the two groups. The classroom learners had various language backgrounds (including Romance languages as well as Arabic, Mauritian Creole, and English, whereas all of the migrant workers were speakers of Romance languages) and all of them were already at least bilingual, if not multi-lingual, in languages other than German. Classroom learners and migrant learners also likely have various social and educational background differences, as noted by Ellis.

However, despite these differences, classroom learners acquired the features largely in the same order as the naturalistic learners did. Additionally, it is important to note that in the case of the classroom learners, the internal, natural order of acquisition was *not* aligned with the order in which rules were

presented in the classroom. For example, the first rule introduced by the instructors to the classroom learners was an “inversion rule” which states that the verb and subject of a sentence are inverted in certain situations. However, most classroom learners generally acquired a different rule, related to verb particles, before acquiring the inversion rule taught to them. This “verb particle rule” was also learned by the naturalistic learners first, thus supporting the idea that instruction cannot change the internal mechanisms that guide the order in which features are acquired, as stated above.

Native Language Influence and the Natural Order

While acquisition does proceed in a fairly predictable order which is independent from instruction, there is some debate over the variation that can occur within that order, and what might influence this variation. One factor that is debated as having influence over the acquisition order is the learner’s native language.

For instance, Zoe Pei-sui Luk and Yasuhiro Shirai (2009) have argued that native language can affect the natural order. They reviewed morpheme acquisition studies of English with a focus on three particular morphemes: the plural “s,” articles, and the possessive “s.” These morphemes had been shown to have acquisition orders that were influenced by native language.

The studies that they reviewed included English learners whose native languages were Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Spanish. These studies had kept separate data for each native language group (rather than combining all groups together, regardless of native language).

Luk and Shirai hypothesized that a morpheme in English was more likely to be acquired by a native language group if that native language had a *semantically* (related to meaning) or *structurally* (related to form) similar morpheme. If the native language did not have a similar morpheme, then the morpheme was less easily acquired, and would be acquired later.

For example, the possessive in Chinese is similar to the possessive in English, where the Chinese grammatical particle “de” is attached at the end of the proper noun to show possession: “Ken[’s] pen” → “Ken[de] bi” (Luk & Shirai, 2009). Therefore, Luk and Shirai hypothesized that English possessives might be acquired by Chinese speakers earlier than would be predicted by Krashen’s natural order. Conversely, Chinese (unlike English) does not use articles. This would mean that articles might be acquired later in the natural order sequence of Chinese speakers, according to Luk and Shirai’s hypothesis.

Indeed, these researchers found evidence to support their hypothesis. The data they collected showed that Korean, Chinese, and Japanese speakers learning English acquired plural “s,” articles, and possessive “s” in different stages than those indicated in Krashen’s natural order.

Spanish speakers learning English, however, followed the stages proposed by Krashen (2009) fairly consistently. Luk and Shirai hypothesized that this may be because the data on natural order had been disproportionately influenced by native speakers of Spanish (who may represent a high proportion of learners in the United States).

Similarly, Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada (2013) contended that certain grammatical features of English are acquired later, depending on whether or not the learner’s native language contains those features. For example, articles appear fairly early in Krashen’s natural order sequence (stage 2).

However, learners whose native language does not have articles (e.g., Slavic languages, Japanese and Chinese) might continue to make errors with articles, even at advanced levels of proficiency, indicating that they have not fully acquired this feature.

It should be noted that there is some debate as to whether or not there are some methodological flaws in some of the studies on morpheme accuracy. See the “Notes” section at the end of this chapter for details.

Overall, while there is some debate about whether or not native language plays any role, there is a general consensus that acquisition does proceed in a fairly predictable order, with some features (such as “ing”) getting acquired before others (such as the regular past tense), and that this is clear evidence that acquisition is ruled by internal mechanisms that are fairly impervious to instruction.

Learners Do Not Always Follow the Natural Order in a Precise Manner

Even if all learners in a class share the same native language, they may not follow the natural order in precisely the way it is shown [in the sequence](#) on pages 14-15. Some variation is found in each stage. For example, in [stage 4](#), some students may acquire possessives before the regular past, others will acquire regular past before possessives.

However, within this variation, I will stress once more that research has shown that most learners follow the natural order, even though some learners may appear not to, at times. For example, imagine that a student in your class continues to make errors while using the irregular past after much instruction, but is displaying fewer errors when using the regular past. In Krashen’s order of acquisition, the irregular past (stage 3) comes before the regular past (stage 4). The natural order assumes that skipping stages is unlikely, so let’s take a closer look at why this learner might appear to be “skipping” a stage.

Researchers tell us that one possibility is that the learner has memorized various *chunks*. A *chunk* is a phrase or sentence that the learner considers as a single unit (Gass et al., 2013). For example, an American monolingual English speaker who is traveling to France might memorize how to say “Do you speak English?” (“Parlez-vous anglais?”) in French. Memorizing this one phrase, and producing it correctly every time, doesn’t mean our monolingual English speaker knows how to ask any other yes/no questions in French, or that she even knows what each individual word means.

When a student uses a chunk in class, the teacher might then believe that the student has acquired the grammatical feature included in the chunk. However, the use of a feature in one chunk is not evidence

of acquisition. The teacher will need to provide further opportunities for the student to use that feature in new contexts and structures. For example, if a student has memorized the chunks “I saw my family” and “I played chess,” that student might appear to have acquired the irregular and regular past (“saw” being an irregular past tense verb, “played” being a regular past tense verb). However, we would need to give that student the opportunity to also use a variety of other regular and irregular verbs in the past, in order to have a more accurate understanding of whether or not he had indeed acquired the past tense for those two verb types, or if he is using memorized chunks instead.

Another possibility is that this student is *beginning* to acquire the regular past but hasn’t fully done so yet. Krashen’s natural order does not suggest that language is learned in a linear fashion, completely acquiring features of one stage before moving on to acquiring the next.

When we say that learners are acquiring grammar structures in a particular order, we’re talking about the order in which they *consistently use a structure with very few errors in a variety of contexts*. For example, a learner who uses the regular past correctly in only 10% of his utterances (and makes errors with it in 90% of his utterances) cannot be said to have acquired the past tense, even though he is using it correctly at times. However, as he progresses, he may eventually reach a point where these percentages flip, and he uses the regular past correctly in 90% of his utterances, in a variety of contexts (making errors in only 10% of his utterances). At this point, he may be considered to have “acquired” the regular past.

One more caveat is that if your students have little chance to speak spontaneously at length in the classroom, then you may not be able to accurately judge how much they have acquired. Grammar tests are generally not able to give you reliable information about your students’ acquisition.

Some English Structures Aren’t Listed in Krashen’s Natural Order Sequence

It’s true that [Krashen’s natural order](#) doesn’t even come close to including all the features of English grammar. This is in part because, as stated earlier, the research that led to this order focused exclusively on particular morphemes. Other features like questions and negation, which rely more on *syntax* (word order) are not included. However, there has been some further research into some of these grammar structures in English.

For example, when we look at the stages of acquisition for negation, we do see an order, as found by Herlinda Cancino et al. (1978):

- Stage 1: “No” + verb (“*I no understand”)
- Stage 2: “Don’t” + verb (“*He don’t like it”)
- Stage 3: Negation of the auxiliary verb, where the negation is placed after the auxiliary verb (“You can’t tell her”)
- Stage 4: Analyzed “don’t” and disappearance of the “no + verb” from stage 1 (“It doesn’t spin”)

Research seems to indicate that (1) learners cannot skip these stages, and (2) learners may progress through the stages at different rates, in part depending on their native language (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021). So, it appears that while some English structures are not included in Krashen’s original natural order, these structures may still be learned in a fairly predictable order, guided by the learner’s internal mechanisms.

The Natural Order Should Not Dictate Your Syllabus

After learning about Krashen’s natural order, you might think that it would be best to use it as a template for your curriculum. In other words, you may believe that you should start by teaching your

learners the early-stage structures like “ing” and plurals, and then make your way toward later-stage structures like the regular past and the third person singular.

However, Krashen (2009) himself advises against this practice. There are a few reasons to avoid using the natural order as a pre-made syllabus. Firstly, the natural order doesn’t include orders of acquisition for *all* features of the English language, making it impossible to use as a plan for instruction.

Secondly, even within the natural order, there is room for variation. As noted earlier, some students may learn the regular past before possessives, or vice-versa (both are features found in stage 4). This kind of variation is referred to as “individual differences” and they are found even within natural, overarching trends, including the natural order of acquisition. As we discussed, the orders only express a *general tendency* of learners to acquire certain features before others. While things may look very straightforward and linear on paper, it certainly isn’t the case that each individual learner acquires features in exactly one precise order. Rather, based on some of the factors noted earlier by Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001), we can broadly state that learners *generally* acquire some features before others.

The third reason is that even if we knew the order in which all features of the language we teach were acquired, and we could account for individual differences, there will be some differences in the rate at which students acquire English features. For instance, some learners may move through some stages quite quickly, whereas others may remain in one particular stage for months or longer. The different rates at which learners acquire English may be influenced by various factors related to their particular previous and ongoing linguistic experiences outside the classroom. Some students may have many opportunities to chat with native speakers or may have time to sit down with level-appropriate English readers every day, whereas others may not.

Chapter Takeaways

- A learner’s acquisition path is mostly guided by internal factors and is mostly (though not completely) impervious to instruction.
- In English (and other languages) there is a [natural order](#) in which most learners progress with regard to acquisition of grammatical features, and syntactical structures, as well.
- This order is predictable but there is room for variation, which may be caused by native language, individual differences, or various other factors.
- Our own intuition about what is “simple” for our learners may not always be accurate.
- Learners often progress through order stages at different rates.

How Should Maria Use the Information in This Section, Going Forward?

The information from this section may not have much concrete influence on the actions Maria takes in her classroom, but it should affect how she approaches the teaching-learning cycle for her class. In the beginning of the quarter, Maria may choose to share with her students the fact that language progress is slow and may be marked by many errors along the way (sharing the details of the natural order with her students is probably unnecessary).

More generally, Maria should use the natural order as a loose guide for her students’ development. For example, during class activities, she may overhear an exchange like the one on page 7, where Student 6 makes an error while using the irregular past. If that kind of exchange happens often—that is, if that student often makes errors while using the irregular past in open-ended activities—she can probably assume that Student 6 won’t consistently use the regular past correctly either, since the regular past comes later in the [natural order](#).

On the other hand, she will still need to be careful about extrapolating too much about her students based on the natural order. She shouldn’t assume that the natural order will precisely predict how her

students’ language will develop and should instead assume that her students will show some variation in their development.

Maria should also remember that she can’t help her students skip stages, as stages are governed by internal mechanisms that are, as I mentioned, mostly impervious to instruction. No matter how many times she teaches a late-stage structure, the students in her class that have not yet acquired earlier stage structures likely won’t be ready to learn it yet. Similarly, if her students don’t accurately use a linguistic feature that she’s already taught them (especially a late-stage feature), it’s not necessarily a reflection of poor teaching or poor studying. It may mean that her students aren’t at that stage yet.

Finally, Maria should keep in mind that her students will use linguistic features inconsistently throughout the process of acquiring these features (sometimes correctly, sometimes not). Using a feature consistently correctly is a lengthy process. This is normal and not a cause for concern.

More recommendations that relate to this issue are found later on after we discuss other topics which interact with the natural order.

Suggested Reading:

- VanPatten, B., Smith, M., & Benati, A. (2019). *Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition: An Introduction* [eBook edition]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
doi:10.1017/9781108761529. Chapter 2 specifically explains morphemes and their importance in the history of the field of Second Language Acquisition.

Notes:

1. There may be some methodological constraints when collecting data on morpheme acquisition. Accuracy while using a feature is often measured by looking at contexts where its use is obligatory. But learners may incorrectly use the feature when it is *not* obligatory, for example, a

learner who says, “*The France is in Europe” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; p. 90). Luk & Shirai (2009) also refer to some methodological flaws, such as failing to distinguish between definite and indefinite articles when assessing learners’ acquisition of articles in general. If a learner used, for example, only indefinite articles even when the context requires a definite article, this may not have been recorded in some studies, and could result in a misleadingly higher score.

Chapter 2: Implicit Knowledge vs. Explicit Knowledge

In *Chapter 1: The Natural Order*, we examined an assumption that Maria was making about teaching ESOL: that her students would be able to learn all of the grammatical features she teaches in class, and that the grammatical features she teaches are appropriate for a beginner class. We reviewed some of the SLA research that helps explain why her students may not acquire certain grammatical features, regardless of how or when she teaches those features, until later in their language development.

In this chapter, we will examine another assumption Maria makes about teaching ESOL: that her in-class metalinguistic explanations are sufficient for her students to acquire the grammar rules she is teaching that day, and that they will be able to acquire the rules soon after “practicing” the rules through worksheets and speaking exercises.

Let’s look at why her metalinguistic explanations and classroom exercises are not sufficient for her students to acquire English. To do so, we need to first look at the two types of knowledge involved in instructed language learning.

Explicit Knowledge vs. Implicit Knowledge

Explicit knowledge of a language refers to conscious knowledge *about* that language, that is, knowledge we are aware of having. An example of explicit knowledge is knowing that regular past tense verbs in English end in “-ed,” or that English generally follows the “subject-verb-object” word order. It is possible to have extensive explicit knowledge of English without being able to speak it at all—consider that scholars of dead languages, like Latin, could have extensive explicit knowledge of the languages they study without being able to converse in those languages.

Implicit knowledge, however, is knowledge that is unconscious and cannot necessarily be verbalized (Ellis, 2005). A native English speaker might hear “*The policeman explained Wong the law” (Ellis, 2009 p. 11) and know that this is not a well-formed English sentence but might not be able to explain exactly

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why. Knowing that something contains an error, but not being able to explain why, indicates implicit knowledge of the language. All native speakers of a language have implicit knowledge of it.

It is also possible to have both implicit and explicit knowledge of a language. If a native speaker of English learns English grammar while at school, for example, he now has both implicit and explicit knowledge of English. In order to communicate in a language, implicit knowledge is necessary, but explicit knowledge is not.

This distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge matters because it's directly related to Maria's goal, which is that her students be able to comprehend and respond to other English speakers and be able to "speak without thinking." In order to master these skills, her students must develop an *implicit* knowledge of English. However, when Maria explains grammar rules to her students in class, and when her students practice these rules during in-class exercises, they are developing and relying on *explicit* knowledge of English.

Understanding that there is a distinction between these two kinds of knowledge, however, is only half the story. The other half is that *it is not known whether or not explicit knowledge converts into implicit knowledge*. In other words, learning rules about a language will not necessarily, in itself, result in a learner being able to use those rules in everyday speech or writing. It is important to state this clearly because it runs contrary to the belief that many language teachers have, which is that explicit knowledge results in the development of implicit knowledge. There are several sides to this discussion, as you will find later on in this chapter.

It is true that students may be able to *apply* explicit knowledge while producing output (that is, while speaking or writing). This application of explicit knowledge can then be mistaken, at times, for acquisition. For example, recall the [speaking exercise](#) Maria's students conducted, in which one student was tasked with asking a yes/no question from a stack of cards, such as "did you cook last weekend?",

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and the other student (ideally) provided either an affirmative answer or a negative one (“yes, I did” or “no, I didn’t cook.”). This exercise only required formulaic responses, for which students were able to apply explicit knowledge (that is, applying the explicit rules Maria taught them), and many of the students were accurate in their performance as a result. However, on the assessment, when Maria asked one of her students “Did you like living in Texas?” (a yes/no question similar to the ones in class) the student had responded, “Yes...yes, I like,” which is less accurate than what he produced in class. In this situation, he was not able to apply explicit knowledge (perhaps due to the inherent time constraints of the assessment). He instead relied on his implicit knowledge, which was not yet developed enough to answer the question with a well-formed response.

We can infer that her students’ ability to apply explicit knowledge at some times (but not others) is why Maria was so surprised at their performance during their assessments. Her students were able to apply explicit knowledge when doing the homework worksheets or highly formulaic in-class exercises.

However, they were unable to do so on the assessments, which required unrehearsed responses. As a result, they made more errors and were less fluent on the assessment than they were in her classes. We should argue, though, that what the students displayed on the assessment was a more realistic picture of their knowledge, because they were relying exclusively on their implicit, unconscious language knowledge, which is the one we all rely on when using language outside the classroom.

Does Explicit Knowledge Become Implicit Knowledge?

Experts have various interpretations of the data regarding whether or not explicit knowledge can become implicit knowledge. There are three major viewpoints on this topic, which are generally referred to as the *noninterface position*, the *weak interface position*, and the *strong interface position*.

Noninterface Position

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Those who take the noninterface position claim that explicit knowledge cannot affect the development of implicit knowledge. They claim that explicit and implicit knowledge are completely different, and that implicit knowledge of a language is developed only through the internal mechanisms that process *input* (Ellis, 2009; VanPatten, 2016). *Input*, as discussed in Chapter 1, refers to language that learners hear or see, which has communicative intent (VanPatten et al., 2019).

However, some noninterface position supporters agree that explicit knowledge can still sometimes help learners communicate, especially as Novices. VanPatten (2017) states that many Novice learners may rely on explicitly learned material, because they have not had enough exposure to input to build up their implicit knowledge. As learners are exposed to more input, they will eventually be able to develop enough implicit knowledge such that they can rely on it almost exclusively, rather than relying on explicit knowledge.

Weak Interface Position

Supporters of the weak interface¹ position claim that explicit knowledge may help learners “notice” certain features in the input (Ellis, 2005). Therefore, according to the weak interface position, explicit knowledge is not *converting* into implicit knowledge, but rather it primes the natural processes that the learner uses during acquisition.

Strong Interface Position

Ellis (2009) also asserts that a few researchers support a position that could be considered the *strong interface position*. This position supports the idea that explicit knowledge can be converted into implicit

¹ For more readings on the weak interface position, please see the “Suggested Readings” section at the end of this chapter.

knowledge through practice, though it is unclear what kind of “practice” would be needed for this to happen.

Maria Takes the Strong Interface Position

Maria does not know about these different positions, but her lessons implicitly take the strong interface position.

You will recall that in her “New Grammar” [segment of the lesson](#), Maria first provides learners with an explicit grammar rule when she says: “When giving a ‘yes’ answer to a yes/no question, the answer will always be in the format of ‘yes, *subject* + did.’”

She then provides an example of this rule by writing a negative answer to the question on the board in addition to the affirmative answer, as shown below.

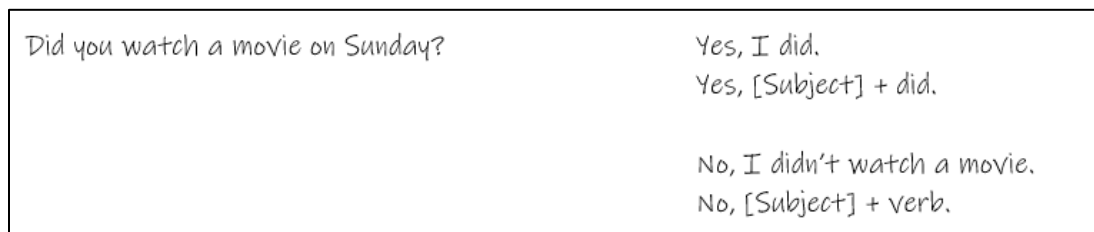


Figure 7: Maria’s in-class whiteboard notes about answering past-tense yes/no questions affirmatively and negatively.

As she explains this rule and writes it on the board, she is asking her learners to explicitly understand it.

She then tries to reinforce this explicit knowledge with “practice” of these explicit rules through [exercises](#). In so doing, she is working from the strong interface position, acting on her unexamined assumption that explicit knowledge can be converted into implicit knowledge through practice.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter on page 6, Maria also engages the students in an exercise involving index cards printed with yes/no question prompts in the past tense. Note that any question in the

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exercise, regardless of content, can be correctly answered with the response “yes I did.” A well-formed negative answer requires correct verb conjugation (e.g.: “yes, I *cooked*”) but is also quite formulaic. In other words, Maria’s students are able to engage in the exercise entirely by applying explicit knowledge.

However, her students are unable to apply explicit knowledge when taking the assessment, which requires them to do more than just recall explicit rules—scores are calculated based on students’ responses to nonformulaic, open-ended questions. As a result, most of her students do not perform highly on this assessment. The challenges that her students faced while taking the assessment illustrates why some experts reject the strong interface position and instead consider other theories to explain how implicit knowledge develops.

How Implicit Knowledge of Language Develops

Maria’s goal— for her students to be able to comprehend and respond to other English speakers and to be able to “speak without thinking” —relies on her students developing implicit knowledge. If we hold the noninterface or weak interface position, as many experts do, we expect that her students develop their implicit knowledge with minimum involvement of explicit knowledge (or without any involvement of it at all). In this section, we’ll consider two theories that explain how implicit knowledge develops without explicit knowledge.

There is a general consensus that we develop implicit knowledge of a language through input, and that without input, there is no acquisition. Our ability to learn language through input is obvious when we consider the fact that children learning their first language rarely have any kind of explicit instruction about that language—certainly nothing comparable to what is seen in a typical language class. Though there are differences in how children and adults learn language, both groups require input for language learning.

Where researchers' opinions differ, however, is on how our brains process that input to develop implicit knowledge. There are two main theories: the *domain-general* learning account and the *language-specific* learning account.

The Domain-General Learning Account

According to Gregory D. Keating, "Every human possesses what are called domain-general learning mechanisms. These mechanisms allow us to learn a variety of complex mental tasks such as reading, solving arithmetic problems, playing chess, and so forth" (Keating, 2016; p. 3).

Proponents of the domain-general learning account purport that it's these same mechanisms that allow us to learn language. In other words, according to this position, language is just another kind of puzzle or problem for our brain to solve. To do so, according to this account, our brain (unconsciously) analyzes input for patterns, and then forms implicit generalizations. These generalizations become the implicit rules that a speaker uses to put together sentences. These implicit rules do not look anything like the textbook rules Maria teaches her learners² (we will discuss these implicit rules more in the next section).

The Language-Specific Learning Account

The Language-Specific Learning Account posits that there are also "language-specific" learning mechanisms that humans are born with, and that it is through these mechanisms that we learn language.

Proponents of this theory propose as evidence for this position that native speakers know more about the language they speak than they could have learned from input alone (Keating, 2016). This argument

² To learn more about what these implicit rules may look like, please see the "Suggested Readings" section at the end of this chapter.

is known as the *poverty of the stimulus* argument—in other words, the stimulus (the input) is “impoverished” and is insufficient to fully account for how much learners can glean from the input.

Consider the following six sentences (Gass et al., 2013):

1. “I *want to* go.”
2. “I *wanna* go.”
3. “Who do you *want to* see?”
4. “Who do you *wanna* see?”
5. “Who do you *want to* feed the dog?”
6. “*Who do you *wanna* feed the dog?” (p. 162):

Sentences 1, 3, and 5 all contain the phrase “want to.” However, only Sentences 1 and 3 can substitute “want to” with “wanna” while still being well-formed English sentences, since Sentence 6 is clearly not well-formed.

As sentence 6 demonstrates, there are times when the English “want to” cannot convert to “wanna.” However, from input alone, it would be difficult or even impossible to judge the correct distribution of “want to” to “wanna” (Gass et al., 2013). Proponents of the language-specific theory argue that we are able to determine the correct distribution of “want to” contracting to “wanna” because of a language-specific internal mechanism that guides us.

These two accounts (*domain-general* and *language-specific*) explain the process through which implicit knowledge of language is created in our minds. However, the accounts don't tell us about how that implicit knowledge of language is *organized* in our minds. To understand the mental organization of our implicit knowledge, we must first discuss *mental representations*.

Mental Representations of Language

Is our implicit knowledge of language equivalent to a set of vocabulary and grammar rules in the brain?

It may seem that way, especially if you are accustomed to the rules-heavy language classes that are typical in many places. However, the rules that we learn from language textbooks are generally not reflective of the way that language is stored in our minds.

Rather, rules that we see in textbooks are just the *description* of how we speak; they are not the definition of language itself. In reality, language is a complex and abstract system humans use to create and understand meaning. We sometimes refer to this system as *mental representation* (VanPatten et al., 2019).

VanPatten (2016) uses the following analogy to distinguish between rules and mental representation:

It is a rule that the sky is blue during the day and not blue at night. That is, one can say with certainty that during the day the sky is one color (blue) and another color at night (black). But the reason the sky is blue during the day has to do with (1) the scattering of the light spectrum as the sun's rays hit the molecules of our atmosphere, and (2) the colors that the rods in our retinas can perceive and transmit to that part of the brain that interprets the data. At night, because of the absence of sun's rays, there is nothing to be dispersed and nothing for our retinas to perceive, so we perceive the absence of color. Saying that there is subject-verb inversion is like saying the sky is blue during the day and black at night. It is not a rule. It is a description of the consequence of a complex process that results in something looking like subject-verb inversion. (p. 655)

When we talk about language, we want to do the same thing—we want to discuss the *cause* (our mental representation) of why we use language in the way we do. For our purposes, we care less about the *description* (“rules”).

What Happens in the Mental Representation of Adult Language Learners?

A person who learned English from birth, of course, has a mental representation of English, but so do English language learners. When we talk about a learner's mental representation, we may refer to it as their *interlanguage*. We call it *interlanguage* because it is partly based on elements from the learner's first language, as well as elements from their target language (English, in the case of English language learners), and therefore it exists somewhere on the "continuum" between these two languages (Gass et al., 2013; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). The interlanguage may also contain elements that do not originate from either of these two languages.

Because of differences in learning experiences, most learners will have interlanguages that are distinct from one another—in other words, different learners of English have different interlanguages for the same target language. Generally, as learners are exposed to more target language input, their interlanguage will change.

Change may not always result in more target-like (accurate) speech. In fact, it is quite typical to witness *U-shaped learning*. This happens when a learner initially begins by using a structure accurately but later begins using it less accurately. Then, ultimately, he returns again to using it accurately. This pattern produces a "U-shape" when plotted on a graph that marks accuracy of a grammatical feature, which is how it gets its name (VanPatten et al., 2019).

To illustrate why this might happen, imagine a Novice learner who consistently uses the irregular past "went" correctly in sentences like "we went there" or "he went to California." This learner may have memorized certain phrases (you will recall we discussed the concept of "memorized chunks" in [Chapter 1](#)) which gives the impression that he has acquired the irregular past. Later on, as the learner begins to acquire the regular past, he might begin trying to "regularize" irregular verbs and may produce sentences like "*we go-ed to a concert" or even "*they wented to the store", producing inaccurate

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forms despite the fact that he was producing accurate ones earlier. Then, as the learner is exposed to more input, the correct conjugation of irregular verbs will be fully acquired, and he will use the accurate form of the irregular past (VanPatten et al., 2019).

Chapter Takeaways

- Implicit knowledge of a language is unconscious and intuitive. Explicit knowledge of a language is conscious knowledge; it is the ability to verbalize “rules” of a language.
- Implicit knowledge is what we use for communication.
- Learners build their mental representation for the target language through repeated exposure to input.
- The learner’s mental representation of the target language does not contain the kinds of rules found in textbooks.

How Should Maria Use the Information in This Section, Going Forward?

Maria should first adjust her expectations in the classroom. She should keep in mind that an error-free utterance from a student is not necessarily an indication of acquisition but may instead be the result of the student applying explicit knowledge. Maria should also keep in mind that utterances containing errors are not always signs of regression or stagnation. In fact, they may actually be signs of progression, as is the case in U-shaped learning, when a learner moves from memorized chunks toward the use of implicit rules.

Next, Maria should aim to spend less time teaching and practicing explicit knowledge in the classroom. A large portion of her class is devoted to teaching explicit rules, and conducting formulaic exercises during which learners apply those explicit rules. Given what she now knows about explicit knowledge not necessarily converting into implicit knowledge, and that implicit knowledge is the key to her students’ ability to develop language for communication, Maria should end the focus on explicit knowledge in the

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classroom. Rather, she can begin to provide more input in the classroom, as this is the way to help students develop implicit knowledge. We'll talk more about this in the next chapter.

Suggested Readings:

1. Larsen-Freeman, D., & Long, M.H. (1991). *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research* (1st ed.). Routledge. Kindle Edition. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315835891>. Chapter 8, Section 8 specifically deals with the weak interface position.
2. Ellis, R., Loewen, S., Elder, C., Reinders, H., Erlam, R. & Philp, J. (2009). *Implicit and Explicit Knowledge in Second Language Learning, Testing and Teaching*. Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847691767>. Chapter 1 dives more deeply into various circumstances under which the weak interface position may aid acquisition.
3. VanPatten, B., Smith, M., & Benati, A. (2019). *Key Questions in Second Language Acquisition: An Introduction* [eBook edition]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
doi:10.1017/9781108761529. Chapter 7 specifically offers a rebuttal to the weak interface position, in favor of the noninterface position.

Chapter 3: Input

In *Chapter 2: Implicit Knowledge vs. Explicit Knowledge*, we established the differences between explicit and implicit knowledge, and that a learner's interlanguage is built from their implicit knowledge. We also established that it is only through exposure to *input* that we are able to build our implicit system of language, and that there is no acquisition without input.

In this chapter, we will examine why input is so crucial for acquisition. I will also discuss what kind of input is useful in aiding acquisition, and how to identify that kind of input so that you may introduce it in your classroom.

Defining Input

In Chapter 1, I defined *input* as "language that the learner hears or sees that has communicative intent" (VanPatten et al., 2019). To understand this definition fully, I must also define *communication*. Building off Sandra Savignon's definition, VanPatten et al. (2019) define communication as "the expression and interpretation of meaning in a given context with a given purpose" (p. 46). At first blush, this may seem redundant: doesn't all language have communicative intent?

Indeed, most language does fit this definition, whether it's a short exchange with a neighbor about the weather, or a toothbrush advertisement in a magazine. In the context of the classroom, many forms of language fit this definition as well, whether it's a teacher asking her students "please open your books to page 17," or having a chat with a learner during a break about his father recovering from pneumonia. In each of these instances, the meaning contained in the language is *purposeful* (the teacher wants the learner to do something; the teacher is interested in the student's family's well-being), and the learner who hears/sees this language must interpret this meaning in order to participate in the communicative exchange.

However, there are also examples of language without communicative intent, especially in the classroom. Consider a typical vocabulary list. Each word has a meaning, but the list of words itself does not communicate any message to the reader. It's just that—a list of words. A vocabulary list with words related to weather such as “windy, cloudy, rainy,” is not an “expression of meaning in a given context.” However, when those same words are found in the context of a weather app that a learner accesses to figure out what to wear before leaving her house, those words become input. Another example would be if your coworker gestured to your dripping umbrella and remarked “It sure is a windy, cloudy, rainy day today, huh?”

This doesn't mean that you can't hand out vocabulary lists in your class— they can be useful as references—but it means that they can't be considered input for students. That is, they are not being used, unconsciously, by the learner to create her interlanguage, which is what the student needs to learn the language.

Let's now take a look at the use of language in Maria's class with the goal of examining how much input her learners were exposed to during class. Recall [the speaking exercise](#) that Maria's students conducted in class. In the exercise, one student was tasked with asking a yes/no question found on a stack of cards (“did you cook last weekend?”), and the partner was tasked with providing either an affirmative answer or a negative one (“yes, I did” or “no, I didn't cook.”). Superficially, it may appear that each student in the pair is providing input to the other. No one would argue that the question “Did you cook last weekend?” has no meaning.

However, this exercise still cannot be considered input, according to our definition. There are a few reasons why this is the case, and the reasons are found in both the definition of “input” and of “communicative intent”. First, in order to complete the exercise successfully, the learners involved in the exercise *do not need to understand the meaning of the question/answer*. In other words, it does not

meet our definition of input because it has no communicative intent. Each question could be correctly answered with “yes I did,” regardless of whether the learner actually engaged in that activity recently or even understood the question. The negative response (“No, I didn’t [verb]”) does need to contain the verb from the question, but *it doesn’t require the students to actually know what that verb means*.

Second, each member of the pair is not actually communicating meaning to each other *in context*, as our definition of communication requires. The only reason the pair is talking about cooking (or any other topic in the deck of prompts) is for the purpose of practicing how to construct questions and answers in English, not to gain information through language. Any actual cooking they did is irrelevant.

Finally, since no meaning is exchanged and there is no specific context for this exchange, the exchange is not *purposeful*, which is also required by our definition of communication. There is no goal beyond practicing language forms.

Now consider the same dialogue in a different context: Katya, (a learner in Maria’s class) bumps into her neighbor, John, in the hallway of their apartment building. John says “I smelled something delicious coming from your apartment on Saturday. Did you cook last weekend? Or was that just takeout?”

In that case, John is genuinely trying to *communicate meaning*, as our definition of input requires. He expects an equally meaningful response from Katya that will allow for him to *interpret meaning*, as also required by our definition of communication. The exchange is *contextualized* by the relationship of the two speakers and their previous history of exchanges (possibly about food). Finally, the exchange has a *purpose*: John may be trying to learn more about Katya and her cooking skills, or perhaps is hoping to get the recipe or the name of the take-out place from her. It is this expectation for interpreting and expressing meaning, in context, for a purpose that goes beyond practicing language forms that makes this conversation totally different from the speaking exercise in Maria’s classroom.

However, Maria's lesson plan was not completely lacking input. In her [lesson plan segment](#) on the Beatles, she expressed meaning about the cultural significance of the Beatles and expected that her students would interpret this meaning, though it is possible that this input was not fully comprehensible to her students. This expression of meaning also had a purpose beyond language practice—she was trying to help her students learn more about American culture.

The reading about winter activities in New York City, too, was an expression of meaning about upcoming activities that students could attend in their adopted home city. The intended purpose of the reading was twofold: to introduce some fun local events that her students could enjoy, but also for students to answer comprehension questions about the reading. In other words, part of the purpose was “language practice,” which is not ideal for input.

In contrast to these two input activities, some of the other exercises that her students did as “English practice” were not, in fact, input, because they lacked any expression or interpretation of meaning. For example, when reviewing the homework, Maria asks, “The people in the picture are cooking tomatoes. What else can we cook?” There is no purpose to this question beyond language practice—she is not shopping in a supermarket or preparing a meal with her students. Because this question lacks purpose beyond “practice”, we cannot consider it to be communication, and therefore it cannot be considered input.

In short, although input can be provided to students in many different forms, teachers should not assume that all language is input, since some instances of language that occur in the classroom are in fact not input at all. With this in mind, let's now look at how we can ensure that when input *is* introduced, it is useful for our learners.

All Input Is Not of Equal Value

Input can vary in how effectively it contributes to the development of a learner's interlanguage. For example, it is a common belief that a learner can acquire a new language by "just watching television." However, the usefulness of "just watching television" depends on the learner's proficiency level and the actual input in the TV show. A Novice learner might find that watching *Seinfeld* would likely not help him learn, as he wouldn't be able to understand most of the dialogue. As Krashen (2009) puts it, input like this is just "noise" for that learner (despite the fact that it does indeed have communicative intent). On the other hand, input that is far below the learner's current level is also unhelpful. An Advanced learner who watches *Sesame Street* with his kids may in fact find that the dialogue is far too basic to help him learn anything new. If the input only contains structures and vocabulary that the learner already knows, then that input is unlikely to aid in acquisition. As Michael Long (1983) argued, input that is comprehensible due to being "impoverished" (that is, too simple or repetitious) does not aid acquisition. In contrast to input that is too advanced or too basic, there is *comprehensible input*, which does indeed help the learner to develop language. *Comprehensible input* is input that the learner is able to understand the overall meaning of, even if she doesn't understand every individual word or structure in it. Indeed, comprehensible input is the key to acquisition in many ways, as we will see in the next section of this chapter.

The Importance of Comprehensible Input

Comprehensible input is so crucial for learners because it allows them to connect form and meaning. An example of connecting form and meaning is knowing that the word *dog* refers to a kind of canine. This is a connection between the form, *dog* (that is, the letters "d" "o" and "g" or the sounds /d/ /ɔ/ /g/), and the meaning (the actual four-legged animal that we call "dog"). Form-meaning connections are not

limited to nouns or full words (Keating, 2016). Another example of form-meaning connection is knowing that the *-ed* morpheme in *walked* indicates that the verb is in the past tense (VanPatten et al., 2019).

If a learner isn't able to process anything in the input because it is just "noise," then he will not be able to make any form-meaning connections, and acquisition will not occur. Long (1981) gives the example of three English native speakers who spent seven months in China, surrounded by Mandarin and Cantonese speakers. Though they frequently heard these two Chinese dialects being spoken, these English speakers only acquired a handful of vocabulary words and phrases. Two of the three speakers were, according to Long, "linguistically sophisticated." Regardless of their sophistication, the lack of exposure to *comprehensible* input prevented them from acquiring either Chinese dialect.

We might assume that comprehensible input is only necessary for adults, since children are often thought to be "better" at language learning. However, comprehensible input is necessary for children's acquisition, as well. Susan Ervin-Tripp (1973) observed that hearing children (that is, non-deaf children) of deaf parents were not able to acquire spoken language through tv or radio, likely because this input was not comprehensible for them. Ervin-Tripp also noted that parents in many different cultures often undertake efforts to make their speech comprehensible when talking to children, through repetitions and various other strategies.

Even when the input *is* comprehensible, learners may not be able to process every word or morpheme in the input—for example, most beginner learners will start by processing *content words* (words which express meaning) but they may process fewer *function words* (words which express grammatical relationships). The part of the input that the learner *is* able to process and attend to is called *intake* (Keating, 2016).

Keating (2016) gives an example to show the difference between input and intake. Here, Jung Soo is an English learner, having a conversation with David, a native English speaker:

“Jung Soo: What you do last night?”

David: I downloaded songs from iTunes.” (p. 11)

Because Jung Soo is a beginner learner, he is unable to fully attend to all the words and morphemes in David’s response. The comparison of input (David’s actual response) vs. intake (the part of the response that Jung Soo is able to attend to), as hypothesized by Keating, is below.

“Input: I downloaded songs from iTunes.

Intake: I download song (from) iTunes.” (p. 11)

Note the differences. Jung Soo processes the content words but misses two morphemes and one function word: the past tense ending of “download,” the pluralization of “song,” and the preposition “from.”

The input itself is not what changes the learner’s interlanguage—the intake is. Therefore, if something in the input is not included in the intake (for example, above, where Jung Soo does not process the past tense ending of “downloaded”), it cannot change the learner’s interlanguage.

To be clear, this doesn’t mean that David’s response wasn’t comprehensible input—it was. Jung Soo was able to *understand* the global meaning of David’s response, he just couldn’t attend to every element in the input. If the input were incomprehensible, Jung Soo would not have had any intake, and, as we noted earlier, no acquisition would be able to occur as a result.

As Jung Soo’s acquisition progresses through exposure to comprehensible input and through other tasks that aid in acquisition (as we will encounter in the next chapter, [Chapter 4](#)), he will become more and more capable of attending to morphemes like the past tense “-ed.” Later, he may hear the same sentence again (“I downloaded songs from iTunes”) and be able to attend to parts of the sentence that

he was not previously able to attend to. If so, his intake will contain more of the original input, and his interlanguage may eventually restructure to become more target-like.

Providing Comprehensible Input to Your Students

As we have seen, learners are only able to acquire language through comprehensible input. Recall that comprehensibility is context-dependent—it depends on the content of the input as well as the proficiency of the learner. Comprehensible input for an Advanced learner is almost certainly quite different from comprehensible input for a Novice one.

Providing comprehensible input in the classroom can be challenging, since even learners in the same class level can vary somewhat in their proficiency. It is crucial for teachers to gain an understanding of their learners' proficiency levels early on, in order to provide input that is as comprehensible to the group as a whole as possible, or to differentiate instruction¹. However, teachers should not worry excessively about perfectly adjusting their input to be the right level for their students. Krashen (2009) states that even input that is “roughly-tuned” to the learners' levels is usually sufficient for acquisition. As he says, “finely-tuning” the input to even one learner's level is impossible, to do so for an entire class would be even more so.

There are linguistic and non-linguistic techniques that teachers may use to modify input and make it more comprehensible. We will review these techniques in this section.

Linguistic Tools to Aid Comprehension

All of the following techniques in this section are taken from Krashen (2009) unless otherwise noted.

¹ *Differentiated instruction* is “the process of identifying students' individual learning strengths, needs, and interests and adapting lessons to match them” (Sparks, 2015).

To make input more comprehensible to their learners, teachers may choose to speak slowly with clear articulation. This is not to say that you should overcompensate and speak in an exaggeratedly slow way, since this would not prepare your learners for actual interactions in the world outside the classroom. Rather, it means speaking slower in general, as well as taking meaningful pauses between sentences and even between words.

For example, when Maria explained to her class who The Beatles were, she could have said, “These are [slight pause] The Beatles. [Pause] The Beatles [slight pause] were a famous band.” This allows time for her students to process what she’s saying (VanPatten, 2017).

Another technique for making input more comprehensible is to use repetition and rephrasing (VanPatten, 2017). This is common in first language acquisition (Krashen, 2009; VanPatten, 2017), as we see many caretakers repeat the same questions to children or rephrase something they said when the child doesn’t understand. However, the technique also works for adult language learners. For example, after playing the Beatles song for her students, Maria could have done a poll of the class, to see whether the majority of them liked or disliked the song, while keeping track of this poll on the whiteboard. She could ask one student “Did you like the song?” and then repeat that student’s response (“Ok, Maimouna liked the song”) while making a mark on the whiteboard in the “liked the song” column. She could continue repeating the question to each student in the class, rephrasing their responses on occasion (“Yakov didn’t like the song. He thought the song was bad.”) (modified from VanPatten, 2017).

Teachers may also choose to include more high-frequency vocabulary in the input, and to include fewer idioms or slang words. This may seem obvious at first. Many teachers might know to avoid slang and colorful idioms such as “let’s not beat around the bush” or “those are a dime a dozen.” However, many common idioms in English are much simpler and shorter than those examples. Idioms also include such

phrases as “kind of,” as in “this is *kind of* complicated.” Knowing the individual words “kind” and “of” will not help a learner understand that “kind of” is an adverb, meaning “somewhat.”

Dilin Liu (2003) found that some of the most common idioms in spoken American English included such phrases as *kind of*, *sort of*, *of course*, *as well*, *go through*, *get into*, and *first of all*. Given that these idioms are so common, it may be important to make sure your students understand them. However, if you choose to use them, you will need to make sure that their meaning is clear from context.

Finally, teachers may choose to syntactically simplify the input. They may also choose to shorten sentences. In Maria’s case, because her students are just beginners, she might keep her sentences very short. “The Beatles were a rock band. They were from England. They were famous in the 1960s. They are still famous now. Let’s listen to their music.” In addition to being short, these sentences have no relative clauses or conjunctions; they are syntactically simple.

Non-Linguistic Tools to Aid Comprehension

In addition to making the input itself comprehensible, there are also non-linguistic ways to aid your students’ comprehension of the input. Two such ways are to provide realia (i.e., props) and to talk about topics that are familiar to the students. If teaching an ESOL lesson about grocery shopping, for example, a teacher could bring in grocery items, grocery bags, and even some grocery store receipts. Keep in mind that what is familiar to your students will vary widely, especially if your classes have students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Another crucial way to aid comprehension is through comprehension checking. It is through this checking that we can make sure that our input is indeed comprehensible. To do so, a teacher can simply ask “do you understand?” though this is not necessarily a fully reliable way of truly checking comprehension. An alternate, more reliable strategy is that the teacher can ask specific questions and have the learner engage with the input.

For example, in her explanation of who the Beatles were, Maria could have said “The Beatles were a famous band. They were from England. They were popular in the 1960s.” Then, shortly after, she could have asked “Where were the Beatles from?” or, perhaps, “Were the Beatles from England or the United States?” This allows her to check her students’ comprehension, rather than rely on their own self-reporting of comprehension.

Chapter Takeaways

- Input is language that has communicative intent (that is, it must allow for the expression and interpretation of meaning in a given context) and is purposeful.
- Acquisition only occurs when the learner has exposure to *comprehensible input*—that is, input whose overall meaning is accessible to the learner, even if he doesn’t understand every individual word in the input. Without comprehensible input, there is no acquisition.
- The comprehensibility of input depends on the content of the input and the learner’s proficiency level. Comprehensible input for an Advanced speaker would likely not be considered comprehensible input for a Novice one.
- Comprehensibility of input can be facilitated by the implementation of several strategies:
 - Clear articulation and slower speech
 - Repetition and rephrasing
 - Use of high-frequency vocabulary and fewer idioms
 - Syntactic simplification and shorter sentences
 - Non-linguistic aids such as realia, input related to familiar topics, and comprehension checks

How Should Maria Use the Information in This Section, Going Forward?

In the example class described in [the introduction](#), the only input that Maria provided during her class are her own classroom directions (“please take out your homework worksheets”), her brief introduction of the Beatles, and the reading about winter activities in New York City. Other exercises that she did in class, such as the paired speaking exercise, did not provide input for her students.

Maria will need to provide more comprehensible input to her students—as much as possible, in fact. To do so, she may choose to include more readings in class, introduce level-appropriate video or audio clips with accompanying *tasks*², speak more to her students on issues that are communicative and purposeful (see the example below), or create tasks that her students can complete on their own or with others.

For example, instead of the [paired speaking exercise](#) she did, Maria could provide her students with a worksheet, asking the following:

Last weekend, what did you do? Mark your answers.

1. *I cooked.*
2. *I read a book.*
3. *I played a game.*
4. *I took a hike.*
5. *I saw friends.*

Now ask your partner these questions. Mark your partner's answers.

1. *Did you cook?*
2. *Did you read a book?*

² For the purposes of this thesis, *tasks* are activities that (1) involve the expression and interpretation of meaning, and (2) have a purpose beyond “practicing language” (VanPatten, 2017). For more reading on *tasks*, please see the “Suggested Reading” list at the end of this chapter.

3. *Did you play a game?*
4. *Did you take a hike?*
5. *Did you see friends?*

Once students have asked each other the questions, Maria can lead a discussion about hobbies in the classroom and hobbies in the United States in general. She can begin the discussion by asking each student to say what their partner did last weekend. As they answer, she can keep track of which activities are the most popular, and then compare how the classes' hobbies compare to New Yorkers' hobbies (modified from VanPatten, 2017).

Because this task is intended for low-level learners, it does not require much expression of meaning (students are not creating much meaning beyond answering “yes” or “no”), but it does require interpretation of meaning. Furthermore, it has a context, in that the questions that they ask each other are part of a larger discussion about hobbies in New York. Finally, it has a purpose—students will learn more about whether their own hobbies are common or uncommon in the state where they live.

Suggested Reading:

- VanPatten, B. (2017) *While We're on the Topic: BVP on Language, Acquisition, and Classroom Practice*. American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. While the entire book might be interesting for most language teachers, Chapters 4 and 5 specifically give examples of how to introduce comprehensive input and input-related tasks in the classroom. Chapter 5 also clarifies the differences between tasks, activities, and exercises.

Chapter 4: Output

In *Chapter 3: Input*, we examined the role of comprehensible input in language acquisition and discussed techniques for ensuring that the input you introduce in the classroom is comprehensible. In this chapter, I will define *output* and examine its role in acquisition. I will also discuss how output may serve as a complement to input in the classroom, and the research that demonstrates the benefits of output activities in language learning.

Defining Output

Output is language that the learner produces that is meaning-bearing (Keating, 2016; VanPatten et al., 2019). Output is similar to input in that it does not refer to all of the learner's language production, but rather only the language production that has communicative intent.

To illustrate this definition of output, recall [the speaking exercise](#) Maria's students conducted in class, mentioned several times throughout this thesis. In this exercise, conducted in pairs, one student was tasked with asking a yes/no question selected from a stack of cards, such as "Did you cook last weekend?", and the other student (ideally) provided either an affirmative answer or a negative one ("yes, I did" or "no, I didn't cook.").

In Chapter 3, we discussed the fact that neither person in this pair was providing input to the other, because (1) the language being used did not allow for interpretation of meaning, (2) was not taking place within a relevant context, and (3) had no purpose beyond language practice. As you may have guessed, it is also the case that neither person was providing output. The exercise did not give students the opportunity to *express* any meaning, and, again, the language they used had no relevant context or purpose.

In Chapter 3, we also discussed a different, hypothetical context for the same dialogue, in which a learner, Katya, bumps into her neighbor, John, in the hallway of their apartment building. John then says

“I smelled something delicious coming from your apartment on Saturday. Did you cook last weekend? Or was that just takeout?” As we discussed, John’s question is indeed input, as Katya must interpret this meaning in order to formulate a response, and his question has a communicative intent. In this context, if Katya responds by saying, “No, I didn’t cook, it was from the restaurant across the street,” that is output. She is expressing meaning that John will have to interpret, within a relevant context, with a purpose (perhaps the purpose of letting him know that there’s a great new restaurant in their neighborhood).

The Output Hypothesis

There is complete agreement that input is crucial to acquisition. Indeed, some experts assert that input is all that humans need to acquire language, inside or outside a classroom, babies and adults alike. However, there is some evidence to indicate that output may also be needed to fully acquire certain grammatical structures.

The idea that output is necessary for acquisition is stated in the *Output Hypothesis*, proposed by Merrill Swain (1985). The Output Hypothesis states that “the act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes, under certain circumstances, part of the process of second language learning” (Swain, 2005, p. 471).

Swain developed the Output Hypothesis after observing sixth grade Anglophone French-immersion students in Canada. A French proficiency test was administered to two different groups of students: the Anglophone students, as well as native French speakers in a French monolingual school. In a 1985 paper explaining this study, Swain references a 1981 study by Swain, Lapkin & Andrew, noting that “on tests of listening comprehension in French, the immersion students perform as well as native speakers of French by grade 6” (Swain, 1985, p. 246). However, in her 1985 paper, she notes that sixth grade immersion students scored much lower than their native French speaker counterparts on the sections for

grammatical oral *production*, grammatical multiple choice, and grammatical written *production*, when compared to native speakers. Swain further noted that scores on *discourse* (the ability to “produce and recognize coherent and cohesive text” (Swain, 1985, p. 238)) were fairly similar.

Swain posited that the reason for the lower grammar scores was due to the fact that, while both groups of students were exposed to considerable amounts of French input in school, the immersion students had fewer opportunities for output. Most of them used French only in school and therefore their French language interactions were limited to the interactions they had with teachers and non-native speaker peers. In these interactions, the students were not “pushed” to produce target-like output. Rather, the students often focused on “getting their meaning across,” which was not sufficient to develop their language into higher levels of proficiency. Based on these observations, she argued that while comprehensible input certainly has an important role in acquisition, output might play a role as well.

It should be noted here that Swain did not imply that *any kind* of output will help acquisition. Rather, she is referring to output that “pushes” the learner to be more target-like, by conveying a message “precisely, coherently and appropriately” (Swain, 2005, p. 473).

To illustrate the idea of “pushed output,” Swain (2005) cites the example below from Alison Mackey (2002). The conversation is between a native English speaker (abbreviated as “NS”) and a non-native English speaker (abbreviated as “NNS”).

NS: And in hand in hand have a bigger glass to see

NS: It's err. You mean, something in his hand?

NNS: Like spectacle. For older person.

NS: Mmm, sorry I don't follow, it's what?

NNS: In hand have he have has a glass for looking through for make the print bigger to see, to see the print, for magnify

NS: He has some glasses?

NNS: Magnify glasses he has magnifying glass.

NS: Oh, aha, I see, a magnifying glass, right that's a good one, ok. (pp. 389-390)

The learner (NNS) in the example is unable to fully get his or her meaning across in the initial attempt, as made clear by the native speaker's confusion. The learner realizes this and is "pushed" to produce output that is more target-like.

Evidence of the Benefit of Output

There is evidence that output can aid acquisition. Shinichi Izumi (2002) investigated the effects of output on ESOL learners who were studying relative clauses. He found that the participants who were engaged in output tasks outperformed those who were not. He concluded that output may sometimes promote noticing (that is, detecting and paying attention to) certain forms in the input, and also promote the integrative processing of those forms.

Victoria Russell (2014) performed a replication of the Izumi study, but with a different grammatical structure, the Spanish future tense, with Spanish language learners. Her results were highly consistent with Izumi's: the groups who performed output activities after engaging with input scored higher on post-tests than the groups that only engaged with input.

Mi-Jeong Song & Bo-Ram Suh, (2008) also found evidence that output can aid acquisition. They studied acquisition of the counterfactual conditional in Korean speakers learning English. Two kinds of output tasks were used: reconstruction, where participants are asked to read a passage and then reconstruct it on a piece of paper, and picture-cued writing, where the participant is given a relevant picture or

drawing that prompts a response to a question. Both of these output tasks were intended to prompt participants to use the counterfactual conditional (that is, the grammatical form being focused on in the study) in their responses. In post-tests, learners in both of these groups outperformed the learners in the control group, who answered comprehension and opinion questions about the content found in the input (which did not prompt them to use the counterfactual conditional).

Chapter Takeaways

- *Output* is language that the learner produces that is meaning-bearing (Keating, 2016; VanPatten et al., 2019).
- Output that pushes the learner to be more target-like may aid acquisition in ways that input doesn't.

How Should Maria Use the Information in This Section, Going Forward?

Maria's current exercises encourage language production from her students, but do not encourage output, i.e., language production that is meaning-bearing.

She should, therefore, replace these exercises with tasks (see the footnote on page 51 for the difference between "exercises" and "tasks") that encourage the production of meaning-bearing language between her students. For her beginner class, this might include a drawing task in pairs: One student is given a photo or picture and must describe the picture accurately enough to her partner such that the partner is able to re-create the photo, with the goal being to create an accurate sketch. Unlike Maria's original "speaking" exercise, this task (1) requires interpretation and expression of meaning (to perform this task, learners must understand what they and others are saying, and are pushed to be as accurate as they can be in their output expression) and (2) is purposeful (learners must do something with the information received/exchanged).

For more ideas on classroom tasks that encourage output production, please refer to the Suggested Reading section, below.

Suggested Reading:

VanPatten, B. (2017) *While We're on the Topic: BVP on Language, Acquisition, and Classroom Practice*.

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Chapter 5, also recommended in the previous chapter of this thesis, gives examples of output-focused tasks that can be introduced in the classroom.

Chapter 5: Corrective Feedback

In *Chapter 4: Output*, I discussed output and its role in acquisition. In this chapter, I will discuss what to do when your students' output contains an error. While reading this chapter, it is important to keep in mind that errors are normal in the language of lower-proficiency learners and are often a sign of development.

I will first discuss different ways to provide corrective feedback, and what is known about students' attitudes toward corrective feedback in general. We will then review some studies that examine the effectiveness of corrective feedback, as well as the various factors that contribute to this effectiveness in the classroom.

What Is Corrective Feedback?

Corrective feedback (hereafter referred to as "CF") is feedback that is intended to correct a linguistic error made by a student. When we discuss CF, we also often talk about the action of *repair*, which takes place when a student responds to CF by correcting the original error entirely and does not introduce a new error (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). For example:

(1) Student: *I goed there yesterday.

Teacher: You should say: I *went* there yesterday.

Student: Uh... I *went* there yesterday.

Self-repair refers to the student's self-correction when it occurs without the teacher providing the correct form (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). For example:

(2) Student: *I goed there yesterday.

Teacher: Sorry, yesterday you did what?

Student: Uh...I *went* there yesterday.

CF can take place in many different forms. In their seminal 1997 paper, Roy Lyster and Leila Ranta classified oral feedback into six different types: Explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition. Definitions and examples of each of these types are below. The definitions are paraphrased from Lyster & Ranta (1997).

1. Explicit correction: The teacher explicitly states the correct form after a student error. The correction is preceded by a clear indication that the student has made an error, such as “oh, you mean...” or “you should say...”. The example below is taken from Maria’s example class, on page 6:

(3) Student 1 (reading from the card): Did you watch a movie last week?

Student 2: Yes.

Maria: Oh, actually, it should be "yes, I did."

Student 2: Ah...Yes, I did.

2. Recast: The teacher reformulates the student’s utterance, and in so doing, corrects any errors. Recasting is distinguished from explicit correction by the lack of any mention of the error. The difference is crucial, as we will see later. Additionally, the reformulation might correct one error (Example 4), or it might correct several errors (Example 5):

(4) Student: *She walk to the park every day.

Teacher: She walks to the park every day, I see.

(5) Student: *It still not good than before.

Teacher: Oh, it’s still not as good as before.

3. Clarification Request: The teacher asks the student to clarify their previous utterance, and in so doing, indicates that there is an error. The teacher may ask “What do you mean by [utterance error]?” or even simply “what?” For example:

(6) Student: *Should I put the alarm?

Teacher: What do you mean, “put the alarm”?

4. Metalinguistic Feedback: The teacher provides an explicit indication that an error exists in the student’s utterance but doesn’t provide the correct form. The teacher may do this by simply stating that there is an error. The teacher may also choose to provide more information by asking a question or making a comment that contains metalinguistic information about the nature of the error. The example below is taken from Maria’s example class, on pages 6-7:

(7) Student 3 (reading from the card): Did you work yesterday?

Student 4: *Uh, no. No work yesterday.

Maria: Ah, remember, it's “No + subject + verb...”

5. Elicitation: This type of CF encompasses three different techniques that a teacher may use in order to directly elicit the correct form from a student. The key similarity between them is that they all attempt to elicit self-repair. The teacher does not provide the correct answer.

- a. The teacher may repeat the error and then leave out the error from the sentence, indicating that the student should “fill in the blank” with the correct form of the verb. For example:

(8) Student: *The boy can reads.

Teacher: The boy can...?

- b. The teacher may ask a question to elicit the correct form, such as “How do we say X in English?”. This type of elicitation is used more frequently in classes where the teacher speaks the native language of the students.

Note that this is not a yes/no question, such as “Do we say X in English?” Such a question would be a case of metalinguistic feedback, and as such, would not elicit output from the learner.

For example:

(9) Student: *In the mornings, I drink, um, *café*.

Teacher: How do we say *café* in English?

- c. The teacher may ask the student to reformulate the utterance. For example:

(10) Student: *Yesterday I didn't went there.

Teacher: Ah, can you try to say that again?

6. **Repetition:** The teacher repeats the student's error in its entirety. Note that some elicitation may include some repetition, as seen in example 8. However, the difference is that in an elicitation, only *part* of the student's utterance is repeated. The error is usually omitted, which prompts the student to "fill in the blank." In a repetition, the teacher repeats the error, often while adjusting the tone of voice to emphasize the error to the student.

(11) Student: *She bought new phone.

Teacher: She bought... new phone?

We should also keep in mind that CF is not always necessary, and that it is always possible for a teacher to refrain from using CF in response to a student error. We will talk more about refraining from using CF later in this chapter.

In the next subsection of this chapter, we will review some data concerning student attitudes toward CF, since students' attitudes (and teachers' perceptions of their students' attitudes) may influence the degree to which teachers decide to use CF in the classroom.

How Do Students Feel About CF?

Research on CF has shown that students generally believe CF to be important. Shaofeng Li (2017) performed a meta-analysis¹ to examine student attitudes toward CF and found that 89% of students felt that CF was important in the classroom.

¹ A meta-analysis is a review of multiple research papers on one topic where a statistical analysis of the data is performed to produce a summary of findings across those papers (Li, 2010).

In one of the papers analyzed in Li's study, Eun Jeong Lee (2013) found that students believed CF to be highly helpful. Students were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement on a scale of 1-5, where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 5 indicates strong agreement: "I think I learn more when my teacher corrects my speech." The average rating for this statement was 4.43.

Student preferences should not be the only factor you consider when you are making decisions about CF in your classroom. However, it may be helpful to keep in mind that your students may *prefer* CF, even if you prefer not to use it. It may therefore be useful to explain to your class what your approach to CF is, especially if you suspect your approach to CF may be different from their preference.

Does CF Aid Language Acquisition?

There is reason to believe that some types of CF may aid language acquisition. In a meta-analysis of 15 classroom-based studies, Roy Lyster and Kazuya Saito found that CF "makes a significant impact on L2 learners'² performance" (Lyster & Saito, 2010, p. 289). Not only did CF have a significant effect, but the authors also found that the effects of CF do not decline significantly over time. In his own meta-analysis of oral CF studies, Li (2010) similarly found positive effects of CF on L2 learners' performance, and that those effects were sustained over time.

However, the results of these studies don't imply that CF is equally effective in every circumstance, nor that teachers should start correcting every student error. In the next subsection, we will discuss some factors that contribute to the effectiveness of CF.

Factors That Contribute to The Effectiveness of CF

Factor 1: The Student's Current Stage of Acquisition

² Here, *L2 learner* roughly refers what Krashen and others refer to as a *second language learner*.

If a student is still a beginner, correcting her on a late-stage feature will likely be ineffective (see the [explanation of the natural order](#) in Chapter 1). If you choose to use CF in your classroom, it will be more helpful to focus on the errors that your students make on features that they are currently in the process of acquiring. For beginners, this will likely be features that are in [stage 1 or stage 2](#).

Recall that in the introduction, Maria's students [conducted an exercise](#) that involved asking and responding to questions using the past tense. Though it's possible that some students in a beginner class are developmentally ready to acquire the irregular or even regular past tense, it's unlikely, since both the irregular and regular past are late-stage features. Therefore, Maria should consider refraining from providing CF in response to errors that students make with the regular or irregular past tense, since many of them likely aren't ready to acquire it.

More generally, learner errors are normal, and it is not necessary to correct every error.

Factor 2: Whether or Not the Student Recognizes You Are Giving CF

The student must recognize CF *as CF*, rather than mistaking it for a continuation of communication. While CF statements may seem clear to us as teachers, some types of CF can go unnoticed by the student.

The teacher's CF may go unnoticed by a student for many reasons. One possible reason is that the learner's interlanguage grammar may be different from the target language's grammar. In other words, the learner's interlanguage is made up from rules that are not the rules that are recognized as correct in the target language, as seen in the example in the following paragraph. As a result, the learner doesn't recognize the utterance as containing an error at all.

Learners are particularly unlikely to recognize an attempt to correct them when that attempt is made through the use of a *recast* (Lyster, 1998). The following example from the introduction on pages 8-9 illustrates why recasts can be difficult to recognize as CF:

(12) Student: *I learn people Christmas shopping Fifth Avenue.

Maria (writing on the board): People like to go Christmas shopping on Fifth Avenue.

Student: *Yes, Fifth Avenue have many store.

In the example, the student makes an error, and Maria offers a recast in response, but the student doesn't recognize it as CF. This may be because, as stated previously, the student's interlanguage allows for the grammatical errors in the utterance, but it may also be because in a classroom that focuses on communication rather than form, the student may interpret the recast as a conversational response to his utterance, and not as any kind of attempt at correction. This incorrect interpretation may occur in part because recasts do not create any break in communication. Therefore, there is no reason for the student to suspect that he has made an error.

To some extent, your students' expectations and your teaching style may influence how your students interpret your CF. Roy Lyster & Hirohide Mori (2006) compared Japanese-immersion classrooms with a strong focus on grammatical accuracy to French-immersion classrooms with a strong focus on communication. They found that the Japanese-immersion students were more likely to respond to recasts with repair, (thereby showing that the students understood the recasts to be CF) than the French-immersion students were. Instead, the French immersion students were more likely to respond with repair when the teacher used elicitation.

Based on this observation, the authors surmised that CF was most effective when it contrasted with the usual "orientation" of the classroom. That is, if your classroom is "communication-oriented" and focuses more on communication of ideas rather than grammatical accuracy, you may want to consider using

elicitation. This type of CF will contrast with the “communication” orientation of your classroom, and make it clear that you are engaging in CF. Teachers whose classrooms are “accuracy-oriented”, such as the Japanese-immersion classrooms in the aforementioned study, may be more effective in their use of recasts, because the students are already primed to interpret recasts as CF, due to the usual classroom focus on grammatical accuracy (Lyster & Mori, 2006).

Some teachers may feel that their recasts are very obviously CF, due to the tone of voice or emphasis they use, and that they therefore don’t need to worry about students misconstruing a recast as a continuation of the communication. However, there is evidence to the contrary. Mansoor Al-Surmi (2012) investigated the effect of tone of voice on recasts, to examine whether students were more likely to notice interrogative³ or declarative⁴ recasts. He found that tone made no significant difference in how often a recast was noticed (both types were noticed between 9%-11% of the time).

Recasts of lexical errors—that is, errors related to vocabulary—are particularly tricky, since students may perceive the word provided in the instructor’s recast as a correct alternative to their own utterance (Lyster, 2001). Example 13 illustrates this challenge:

(13) Student: *She is very senses to criticism.

Teacher: Ah, she’s very sensitive to criticism.

Student: Yes.

Example 13 shows that a student may believe that the teacher is trying to teach a new word, “sensitive,” not as a correction, but as a new vocabulary word that can *also* be used in this sentence. This confusion arises in part because teachers often introduce new words to students (Lyster, 2001), and students may not be able to distinguish between a recast and the introduction of a new vocabulary word.

³ An interrogative recast has the tone of a question.

⁴ A declarative recast has the tone of a normal statement (not a question).

Factor 3: Whether or Not the Student Has the Opportunity to Repair the Error

The effectiveness of CF is increased when the student has the opportunity to repair his or her error (preferably without direct help from the teacher), because self-repair may result in a change in the interlanguage. When a student response to a teacher’s correction involves self-repair (rather than repetition), that response “is arguably more effective at destabilizing interlanguage forms” (Lyster & Mori, 2006, p. 273).

It should be noted that encouraging self-repair isn’t always possible in the classroom environment due to time constraints and the flow of the class. However, it is important to note that self-repair is an opportunity for linguistic development.

The importance of self-repair is rooted in Merrill Swain’s Output Hypothesis, which we discussed in [Chapter 4: Output](#). As you may recall, the Output Hypothesis claims that [output](#) may help learners develop a level of accuracy that can’t be achieved with input alone (Swain, 1985).

Lyster & Saito (2010) found evidence for the Output Hypothesis and the importance of self-repair in a meta-analysis in which they analyzed 15 studies that focused on CF in classrooms. They found that, although students did benefit from recasts, they benefitted “even more from . . . prompts and from the greater demand they impose for producing modified output” (Lyster & Saito, 2010, p. 290). “Prompts,” in this case, refer to CF that encourages self-repair.

Of course, self-repair is never guaranteed. The student might respond by looking back at the teacher blankly, or he might produce another sentence with an entirely different error. He may also produce a “correct” repair, only to make the same error again later. However, in general, elicitation can be a useful way to encourage self-repair from a student, which may in turn change the student’s interlanguage.

Factor 4: The type of error the student is making: Phonological, Lexical, or Grammatical?

Recasts can be particularly helpful for *phonological* errors, that is, errors related to pronunciation. In a study that investigated the relationship between CF and error repair, Lyster (2001) found that recasts were effective for students who made phonological errors. In fact, recasts were more effective than CF that encourages accurate self-repair. CF that encourages self-repair is often referred to as *negotiation of form*. When compared to negotiation of form, recasts were more likely to result in immediate repair (Lyster, 2001).

It is possible that recasts were more effective for phonological errors in part because phonological recasts are inherently more obvious as CF, compared to recasts of lexical or grammatical errors (Lyster, 2001). Therefore, students are more likely to recognize the recast as CF, rather than believing it to be a continuation of communication, as we discussed in the subsection *Factor 2: Whether or Not the Student Recognizes You are Giving CF*.

There is less persuasive evidence for the utility of recasts used to correct morpho-syntactic errors⁵. Al-Surmi (2012) found that students noticed only 10% of morpho-syntactic recasts. Similarly, Lyster (2001) found that recasts were half as likely to result in student-generated repair of morpho-syntactic errors, when compared to negotiation of form.

However, the results of these papers don't imply that *all* grammatical errors should be corrected through negotiation of form, or even at all. Indeed, only about half of all grammar errors were even corrected in Lyster's (2001) experiment. He notes that the reason teachers may have refrained from some corrections is likely due to the fact that many of the same grammar errors were repeated several

⁵ Morpho-syntactic errors refer to errors that are morphological or syntactic in nature. Broadly speaking, they refer to "grammar errors." Morphological errors are related to *morphemes*, which were defined earlier as being the minimal units of meaning (Gass et al., 2013). Syntactic errors are related to *syntax*, which is the order of elements in a sentence structure (Gass et al., 2013).

times throughout the class. As I stated earlier, it is not always necessary or even wise to correct all grammar errors.

Lexical errors are similar to morpho-syntactic errors in that negotiation of form tends to be most effective in encouraging self-repair (Lyster, 2001). Negotiation of form is more effective in part due to the previously mentioned fact that students may perceive lexical recasts as “alternative suggestions” for the word they’ve already used.

How Should Maria Use the Information in This Section, Going Forward?

As I stated in Chapter 1, errors are a normal part of the learning process, even for topics that Maria has already taught and reviewed in class. Students will vary in their rates and stages of development and will continue to make errors with grammatical features that they aren’t ready to acquire yet. Therefore, Maria shouldn’t feel pressured to correct every error. Doing so would likely just frustrate her and the students. Additionally, there may be specific classroom activities during which Maria decides not to give CF—for example, activities that focus more on communication and fluency rather than accuracy.

Maria should also be clear and upfront with her students about how she plans to use CF. At the same time, she should keep in mind that her students’ preferences should not dictate what she does in the classroom, especially if their preferences are not supported by the research.

When Maria *does* choose to give CF, she should try to ensure that the students are aware that her feedback is CF and are not mistaking recasts (or any other kind of CF) as part of the conversation.

Additionally, when she provides CF, she should remember that different CF may be best for different errors. Morpho-syntactic and lexical errors might be more effectively corrected by elicitation and the chance for self-repair. Phonological errors, however, may be corrected with recasts.

Suggested Reading:

Lyster, R., & Ranta, L. (1997). Corrective feedback and learner uptake: Negotiation of form in communicative classrooms. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 19(1), 37-66. This seminal paper gives a detailed explanation of the different types of corrective feedback that teachers may provide.

Epilogue

We will conclude by reviewing how Maria may use SLA research to align her lesson plans more closely with her goals, so as to improve her students' language development:

Per Chapter 1, she may decide to revise her expectations for her students' achievement. Beginner students will generally not be able to acquire late-stage features, and so she should not expect that one or two exercises that focus on these features will result in her students being able to use them consistently. Errors in late-stage features will persist for beginner students, and this is completely normal in language development.

Per Chapter 2, she may decide to minimize the amount of time she spends explicitly teaching her students grammatical rules. Explicit knowledge of grammatical rules will not develop her students' implicit knowledge of English, as implicit knowledge can only be developed through exposure to input.

Per Chapter 3, she may decide to include more comprehensible input in her lesson plans, keeping in mind that what is comprehensible for them will depend on their current level of proficiency. It is through this input that her students will develop their implicit knowledge of English.

Per Chapter 4, she may decide to eliminate or greatly reduce the number of speaking activities that do not give students the opportunity to express meaning. Instead, she may ensure that any output activities she conducts in class allow for communication and have a purpose beyond "language practice."

Per Chapter 5, she should craft an explicit policy regarding how she will employ CF in the classroom, and perhaps share that policy with her class. In general, she may want to avoid correcting errors during activities that focus on communication and fluency.

In the introduction we saw that Maria was confused about why her students were not improving their assessment scores over the course of her class. By making the changes outlined above, these changes will benefit her students' English language development outside the classroom, while at the same time she can help her students improve their assessment scores over time.

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