CHAPTER 7: POPULAR IDEAS ABOUT LANGUAGE

LEARNING REVISITED

Fall 2011 - Applied Linguistics - LANE 423

Content adapted from Lightbown and Spada (2006)

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1 Languages are learned mainly through imitation

Go back to the survey you were asked to fill out at the beginning of the semester (It can also be found in pages xvii-xviii of your textbook)

Compare

Your answers back then (based on intuition or experience) to

Your beliefs now (based on scientific evidence you knew through the semester)
Languages are learned mainly through imitation

Is this true?

➤ It is difficult to find support for this argument

➤ Language learners do not simply internalize a great list of imitated and memorized sentences.

➤ Learners produce many novel sentences that they could not have heard before.

➤ These sentences are based on their developing understanding of how the language system works.
1 Languages are learned mainly through imitation

- Some children imitate a great deal as they acquire their first language, but they do not imitate everything they hear. Instead, they selectively imitate certain words or structures that they are in the process of learning.

- In addition, children who do little **overt imitation** learn language as quickly and as well as those who imitate more.

- Thus, imitation may be an individual learning strategy but it is not a universal characteristic of language learners.
1 Languages are learned mainly through imitation

So, does this mean that imitation has no role in language learning at all?

No

➤ Some second language learners may find that they benefit from opportunities to imitate samples of the new language.

➤ Imitation is clearly important in developing pronunciation and intonation.

➤ For some advanced learners who are determined to improve their pronunciation, careful listening and imitation in a language lab can be very valuable.

➤ But for beginning learners, imitation and rote memorization might not lead to much language development.
1 Languages are learned mainly through imitation

If imitation doesn't lead to much language development, then how can learners develop their TL ability?

- Learners need to do more than recite bits of accurate language (like the ones they repeat in class).

- They actually learn as they make the effort needed to understand and make themselves understood in genuinely meaningful interaction.
2 Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors

Is this true?

➢ There is considerable variation in the extent to which parents correct their children's speech.

➢ The variation is based partly on:
  ➢ the children's age
  ➢ the parents' social, linguistic, and educational background
Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors

Parents correction and children's age:

➤ When children are very young, parents rarely comment on grammatical errors although they may correct errors that are related to politeness or if the choice of a word doesn't make sense.

➤ As children reach school age, parents may correct the kinds of non-standard speech that they want their children to outgrow.
Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors

Children cannot depend on parents corrective feedback in order to learn the basic structure of their language. Why?

- Because parents tend to focus on meaning rather than form when they correct children's speech.

- Thus, they may correct an incorrect word choice, an incorrect statement of the facts, or a rude remark, but they do not often react to errors that do not interfere with communication.

Nevertheless, fortunately, children appear to be able to acquire the adult form of the language with little or no explicit feedback.
Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors

The case for second language learners is more complex than that of children. In what way?

- On the one hand, both children and adults can acquire a great deal of language without any formal instruction or feedback on error.

- On the other hand, the evidence suggests that, without corrective feedback and guidance, second language learners may persist in using certain ungrammatical forms for years (fossilization).
3 Highly intelligent people are good language learners

Is this true?

- The kind of intelligence that is measured by IQ tests is often a good predictor of success in classrooms where the emphasis is on learning about the language (e.g. grammar rules and vocabulary items).
3 Highly intelligent people are good language learners

However, in:

- natural language learning settings
- and classrooms where interactive language use is emphasized.

research has shown that learners with a wide variety of intellectual abilities (not necessarily those who score high in IQ tests) can be successful language learners.

This is especially true if the emphasis of is on oral communication skills rather than metalinguistic knowledge.

Most important, is the fact that language learning involves a great variety of skills and abilities.

Students should not be excluded from opportunities to learn another language on the grounds that they do not have the academic ability to succeed.
The best predictor of success in SLA is motivation

I this true?

- Everyone agrees that learners who want to learn tend to do better than those who don't.

- However, sometimes, even highly motivated learners encounter great challenges in language learning.

- We know, for example, that learners who begin learning a second language as adults rarely achieve the fluency and accuracy that children do in first language acquisition.
The best predictor of success in SLA is motivation

- Teachers have no influence over learners' intrinsic motivation for learning an L2.

- Students come to classrooms from different backgrounds and life experiences, all of which have contributed to their motivation to learn and attitudes toward the TL and its community.

How can teachers influence learners' motivation?

They can do so by:

- making the classroom a supportive environment in which students are stimulated, engaged in activities that are appropriate to their age, interests, and cultural backgrounds

- and, most importantly, where students can experience success.

- This in turn can contribute to positive motivation, leading to still greater success.
5 The earlier an L2 is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.

Is this true?

The decision about WHEN to introduce second or foreign language instruction must depend on the objectives of the language programme in the particular social context of the school.
The earlier an L2 is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.

1. When the objective is native-like performance in the second language:
   - then it may be better to begin exposure to the language as early as possible.
   - There is strong research evidence that those who begin second language learning at an early age are most likely to eventually be indistinguishable from (just like) native speakers.
5 The earlier an L2 is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.

Disadvantages of an early start for second language learning:

- If an early start means that children have little opportunity to continue to develop their first language, the resulting subtractive bilingualism may have lasting negative consequences.

- Research shows that a good foundation in the child's first language, including the development of literacy, is a strong base to build on.

- For children from minority language backgrounds, programmes promoting the development of the first language both at home and at school may be more important for long-term success in the second language than an early start in the second language itself.
The earlier an L2 is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.

- Children who can begin their schooling in a language they already know (their first language that is used at home):
  1. will be more self-confident
  2. will be able to learn more effectively in the early school years
  3. and will not lose valuable time in a period of nothingness during which they struggle just to understand what is happening in the classroom.
5 The earlier an L2 is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning

2. When the target is NOT native-like performance, the situation is quite different. When would it be more efficient to begin second language teaching later?

1. If the goal of the educational programme is basic communicative skill not native-like proficiency.

AND

2. If there is a strong commitment to maintaining and developing the child's 1st language,
The earlier an L2 is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.

- Older children (for example, ten-year olds) are able to catch up quickly to those who began earlier (for example, at six- or seven-years old) in programmes offering only a few hours a week of instruction.

- This is especially true if the foreign language course includes a period of more intensive exposure to the new language.

- All school programmes should be based on realistic estimates of how long it takes to learn a second language.

- One or two hours a week—even for seven or eight years—will not produce advanced second language speakers.

- This 'drip-feed' approach often leads to frustration as learners feel that they have been studying 'for years' without making much progress. Sadly, they are sometimes right about this.
6 Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language.

Is this true?

The first language has its positive and negative influence on learning the second language.
6 Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language

- Knowledge of one or more languages can contribute positively to many aspects of second or foreign language learning.

- If the languages are relatively close cousins (e.g. English and German), there is much that learners already 'know'—including the alphabet, cognate words, and some basic principles of syntax.
Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language.

On the other hand, the transfer of patterns from the native language is one of the major sources of errors in learner language (a negative contribution in this case).

When errors are caused by learners' perception of some partial similarity between the first and second languages, they may be difficult to overcome, especially when learners are frequently in contact with other learners who make the same errors (e.g., 'with yourself').
Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language.

Is it true then that the first language (that is not close to the TL, e.g. Arabic and English) has a very bad influence on TL development?

No

- Aspects of the second language that are different from the first language will not necessarily be acquired later or with more difficulty than those aspects that are similar.

- Second language learning is not simply a process of putting second-language words into first-language sentences.

- In fact, learners may not always be able to take advantage of similarities unless they are pointed out to them.

- We saw that learners can be overly discriminating, failing to take advantage of similarities because they assume, incorrectly sometimes, that the languages must be different.
Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language. The first language is NOT the ONLY influence on second language learning. What is the evidence?

- Learners from different backgrounds (Japanese, Mexicans, and Arabs for example) often make the same kinds of errors, and some of these errors are remarkably similar to those made by first language learners (children acquiring their first language).

- In such cases, second-language errors are evidence of the learners' efforts to discover the structure of the target language itself rather than attempts to transfer patterns from their first language.
The best way to learn new vocabulary is through reading.

Is this true?

This statement is absolutely true. But it does not tell the whole story.
The best way to learn new vocabulary is through reading. Children expand their vocabulary dramatically during their school years, and reading is the major source of this growth.
The best way to learn new vocabulary is through reading.

Second language learners can also increase their vocabulary knowledge through reading.

However, few second language learners read the amount of target language text that a child reads throughout more than a decade of schooling.

Research evidence suggests that second language learners benefit from opportunities to read material that is interesting and important to them.

However, those who not only read but also receive guidance from instruction (from teachers and learning resources) and develop good strategies for learning and remembering words will benefit more than those who simply focus on getting the main ideas from a text.
It is essential for learners to be able to pronounce all the individual sounds in the L2

Is this true?

Research on pronunciation has shown that second language speakers' ability to make themselves understood (intelligibility) depends more on their ability to reproduce the stress patterns than on their ability to articulate each individual sound.

Another important emphasis in current research is the undeniable fact that most languages of the world are spoken in many different varieties (different dialects and accents).

Thus, it no longer seems appropriate to insist that learners be taught only one language variety (British English or American English for example) or that only native speakers of a particular variety are the best teachers.

Rather, learners need to learn to understand and produce language varieties that will permit them to engage in communicative interaction with the interlocutor they are most likely to encounter (native speakers or second language speakers, e.g. Indians or French speaking English).
9. Once learners know roughly 1,000 words and the basic structure of a second language, they can easily participate in conversations with native speakers.

Is this true?

It is true that most conversational language involves only a relatively limited number of words and sentence types.
9. Once learners know roughly 1,000 words and the basic structure of a second language, they can easily participate in conversations with native speakers.

Does this mean that knowing words and sentence structures is enough for language learners to understand and make themselves understood?

- No

- They also need to understand and be able to use some of the pragmatic features of the TL.

- It might be useful for them to focus on things like how speakers show respect, apologize, or make requests.

- The cultural differences sometimes lead to communication breakdown or misunderstandings, even when the words and the sentence structures are correct.
10 Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practise examples of each one before going on to another.

Is this true?

- Second language learning is NOT simply linear in its development.

- Learners:
  - may use a particular form accurately at stage x (suggesting that they have learned that form) e.g. *went*
  - fail to produce the form at stage y (or make errors when they attempt it) e.g. *writed, wented, goed*
  - and produce it accurately again at stage z - e.g *wrote, went*

- The decline in accuracy at stage y may show that learners are incorporating new information about the language into their interlanguage.
10 Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practise examples of each one before going on to another.

- So, language development is not just adding one rule after another.
- Rather, it involves processes of integrating new language forms and patterns into an existing interlanguage, readjusting and restructuring until all the pieces fit.
10 Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practise examples of each one before going on to another

- Some structure-based approaches to teaching are based on the false assumption that second language development is a sort of accumulation of rules.

- This can be seen in the organization of textbooks that introduce a particular language feature in the first unit and then move on the next feature, with only rare opportunities for learners to practice the ones previously taught.

- This isolated presentation and practice of one structure at a time does not provide learners with an opportunity to discover how different language features can be incorporated in normal language use.

- Without opportunities to continue hearing, seeing, and using them, the language features learned in the first unit will have been forgotten long before the last.
11 Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones

Is this true?

- No

- Research has shown that no matter how language is presented to learners, certain structures are acquired before others.

- This suggests that it is neither necessary nor desirable to restrict learners' exposure to structures that are perceived to be 'simple'.
Does this mean that we can present complex structures to learners?

- Second language learners benefit from the efforts of native speakers and fluent bilinguals to modify speech to help them understand.

- The language used in modified interaction may contain a variety of linguistic structures, some 'simple' and some 'complex'.

- However, it also includes a range of adjustments that enable second language learners to engage in interactions with native and more advanced speakers of the second language more easily.
12 Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.

Is this true?

Errors are a natural part of language learning process for both children learning their L1 + children and adults learning their L2.
Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.

- Teachers have a responsibility to help learners do their best, and this includes the provision of explicit, form-focused instruction and feedback on errors.

- When errors are persistent, especially when they are shared by almost all students in a class, it is important to bring the problem to their attention.

- Does this mean that as soon as students are corrected, they are expected to immediately adopt the correct form or structure and start using it consistently?

- No, if the error is based on a developmental pattern, the instruction or feedback may be useful only when the learner is ready (in the right developmental stage) for it.

- Therefore, it may be necessary for teachers to repeat feedback on errors many times.
12 Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.

- Excessive feedback on error can have a negative effect on motivation.
- Therefore, teachers must be sensitive to their students' reactions to correction.
- The amount and type of correction that is offered will also vary according to the specific characteristics of the students, as well as their relationship with the teacher and with each other.
- Immediate reaction to errors in an oral communication setting may embarrass some students and discourage them from speaking.
- But for others, such correction is exactly what is needed to help them notice a persistent error at just the moment when it occurs.
Teachers should use materials that expose students only to language structures they have already been taught

Is this true?

Such a procedure can provide comprehensible input of course.

However, given a meaningful context-learners can comprehend the general meaning of oral or written texts that contain vocabulary and structures they have not 'mastered'.

Thus, restricting classroom second language materials to those that contain little or nothing that is new may have several negative consequences.

There will undoubtedly be a loss of motivation if students are not sufficiently challenged.
Teachers should use materials that expose students only to language structures they have already been taught

- Students also need to develop strategies for dealing with 'real' or 'authentic' material if they are eventually going to be prepared for language use outside the classroom.
- They do this first with the teacher's guidance and then independently.
- Restricting students to step-by-step exposure to the language extends their dependency.
- When a particular form is introduced for the first time, or when the teacher feels there is a need for correction of a persistent problem, it is appropriate to use narrow-focus materials that isolate one element in a context where other things seem easy.
- But it would be a disservice to students to use such materials exclusively or even predominantly.
- We should remember that learners who successfully acquire a second language outside classrooms certainly are exposed to a great variety of forms and structures they have not mastered.
14 When learners are allowed to interact freely (for example, in group or pair activities), they copy each other's mistakes.

Is this true?

⇒ If the activities are well designed and learners are appropriately matched, pair and group work provides far more practice in speaking and participating in conversations than a teacher-centered class ever could.

⇒ Research has shown that learners do NOT produce any more errors in their speech when talking to learners at similar levels of proficiency than they do when speaking to learners at more advanced levels or to native speakers.
When learners are allowed to interact freely (for example, in group or pair activities), they copy each other's mistakes.

The research also shows, however, that learners at similar levels cannot ordinarily provide each other with information that would help to correct those errors.

Group and pair work is a valuable addition to the variety of activities that encourage and promote second language development.

Used in combination with individual work and teacher-centered activities, it plays an important role in language teaching and learning.
15 Students learn what they are taught

Is this true?

Teachers know from experience that students don't learn everything they are taught!

More important, however, is the fact that they eventually know far more than they are taught directly.

Some teaching methods typically give learners the opportunity to learn only a restricted number of words and sentence types.
If the language teaching method provides richer language input, does this mean that whatever is taught or made available the input will be acquired by learners right away?

No, some aspects of the second language emerge and evolve according to 'natural' sequences of development and learners may be more likely to learn certain language features when they are developmentally 'ready'.

Thus, attempting to teach aspects of language that are too far away from the learner's current stage of development will usually be frustrating.
Other aspects of language, however, for example, vocabulary, can be taught at any time, as long as the learners are interested in the opportunity to learn and the teaching methods are appropriate to the learner's age, interests, needs, experiences, and learning styles.

So does this mean that learners ONLY learn what they are taught?

No, fortunately, learners can learn a great deal that no one ever teaches them. They are able to use their own internal learning mechanisms to discover many of the complex rules and relationships that underlie the language they are learning.

In this sense, students learn much more than they are taught.
16 Teachers should respond to students' errors by correctly rephrasing what they have said rather than by explicitly pointing out the error.

Is this true?

➢ This kind of feedback, referred to as 'recasts' has been found to be by far the most common type of feedback in second language classrooms.

➢ It is the most common type for learners at different ages and in different instructional models.

What are the main advantages of 'recast'?

1. It does not interrupt the flow of interaction.
2. It is an indirect and polite way of correction.
3. It gives students the information they need without embarrassing them.
16 Teachers should respond to students' errors by correctly rephrasing what they have said rather than by explicitly pointing out the error.

But are recasts really effective in developing the learners language ability?

Research with adult learners in structure-based classes (where the general focus is on grammar and accurate language use) shows that learners do respond to this kind of feedback.
16 Teachers should respond to students' errors by correctly rephrasing what they have said rather than by explicitly pointing out the error.

But are recasts really effective in developing the learners language ability?

❖ However, in *content-based* instruction (for example, immersion classes) and in *communicative instruction* with younger learners:

❖ more explicit forms of feedback have been found to be *more effective* in getting learners to respond immediately.

❖ Recasts often appear to be misinterpreted. Learners seem to hear them as confirmation of meaning rather than as correction of form.

❖ In these situations, recasts have been found to be more effective if the teacher has a method of signaling to the student—tone of voice, gesture, or facial expression—that says to the student, 'I think I understand what you are saying, and I'm telling you how you can say it better'.
17 Students can learn both language and academic content simultaneously in classes where the subject matter is taught in their second language

What are the advantages of content-based instruction?

- Motivation is increased when the material that is used for language teaching has an important value to the students. That is, it creates a genuine, immediate need to learn the language.

- It is usually associated with the opportunity to spend more time in contact with the language, without losing out on instruction in other subject matter.

- The range of vocabulary and language structure that students encounter in learning academic subjects is more varied than that which is typically available in foreign language classes.

- Research has confirmed that students in content-based and immersion classes develop comprehension skills, vocabulary, and general communicative competence in the new language.
What are the disadvantages of content-based instruction?

- Teachers and researchers have found that the ability to understand the content and to function in classroom interaction does not ensure that students will continue to improve in certain aspects of their second language, especially in areas of accuracy on language features that do not usually interfere with meaning.

  - Thus, for example, students can spend years in French immersion without achieving accuracy in marking nouns for gender or verbs for tense.

What is the solution?

- Studies in which an element of form-focused instruction was added to the content-based instruction have shown that, with guidance, students can improve in these areas as well.

- Both teachers and students need to keep in mind that content-based language teaching is also language teaching.
Thank you

I hope you enjoyed the course

Haifa Alroqi