

## On teaching strategies in second language acquisition

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**Abstract:** How to acquire a second language is a question of obvious importance to teachers and language learners, and how to teach a second language has also become a matter of concern to the linguists' interest in the nature of primary linguistic data. Starting with the development stages of second language acquisition and Stephen Krashen's theory, this paper puts forward teaching strategies: analyzing learner characteristics, signing classroom contracts, creating learner-centered classroom, setting language goals, integrating theory with practice and building learner motivation.

**Key words:** teaching strategies; theory; second language acquisition

An understanding of second language acquisition can improve the ability of mainstream teachers to serve the culturally and linguistically diverse students in their classrooms. While significant professional development is necessary to gain a full understanding of second language acquisition theory, some key stages, theories and teaching strategies can be quickly understood and applied in the classroom.

### 1. Development stages of second language acquisition

One concept endorsed by most current theorists is that of a continuum of learning—that is, predictable and sequential stages of second language development, in which the learner progresses from no knowledge of the new language to a level of competency closely resembling that of a native speaker. These theories have resulted in the identification of several distinct stages of second language development. These stages are most often identified as followed:

(1) Stage one: The receptive or preproduction stage

This stage can last from ten hours to six months. Students often have up to 500 “receptive” words (words they can understand, but may not be comfortable using) and can understand new words that are made comprehensible to them. This stage often involves a “silent period” during which students may not speak, but can respond using a variety of strategies including pointing to an object, picture, or person; performing an act, such as standing up or closing a door; gesturing or nodding; or responding with a simple “yes” or “no.” Teachers should not force students to speak until they are ready to do so.

(2) Stage two: The early production stage

The early production stage can last additional six months after the initial stage. Students have usually developed close to 1,000 receptive/active words (that is, they are able to understand and use words). During this stage students can usually speak in one-word or two-word phrases, and can demonstrate comprehension of new material by giving short answers to simple questions of yes/no, either/or, or who/what/where.

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(3) Stage three: The speech emergence stage

This stage can be last up to another year. Students have usually developed approximately 3,000 words and can use short phrases and simple sentences to communicate. Students begin to use dialogue and can ask simple questions, such as “Can I go to the restroom?” and are also able to answer simple questions. Students may produce longer sentences, but often with grammatical errors that can interfere with their communication.

(4) Stage four: The intermediate language proficiency stage

Intermediate proficiency may take up to another year after speech emergence. Students have typically developed close to 6,000 words and are beginning to make complex statements, state opinions, ask for clarification, share their thoughts, and speak at greater length.

(5) Stage five: The advanced language proficiency stage

Gaining advanced proficiency in a second language can be typically taken from five to seven years. By this stage students have developed some specialized content-area vocabulary and can participate fully in grade-level classroom activities if given occasional extra support. Students can speak English using grammar and vocabulary comparable to that of same-age native speakers.

Understanding students who are going through a predictable and sequential series of developmental stages helps teachers predict and accept a student’s current stage, while modifying their instruction to encourage progression to the next stage.

## 2. Stephen Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition

A basic knowledge of second language acquisition theories is extremely useful for mainstream classroom teachers and directly influences their ability to provide appropriate content-area instruction to students. It is especially important in those schools or districts where limited resources result in little or no instructional support in a student’s learning of native language. In these “sink-or-swim” situations, a committed mainstream teacher with a clear understanding of second language acquisition can make all the difference.

A concept endorsed by most language acquisition theorists is Stephen Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition. Stephen Krashen (University of Southern California) is an expert in the field of linguistics, specializing in theories of language acquisition and development. Much of his recent research has involved the study of non-English and bilingual language acquisition. During the past 20 years, he has published over 100 books and articles and has been invited to deliver over 300 lectures at universities throughout the United States and Canada.

Stephen Krashen’s widely known and well-accepted theory of second language acquisition, has had a large impact in all areas of second language research and teaching since the 1980s. Stephen Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition consists of five main hypotheses.

(1) The acquisition-learning hypothesis

The acquisition-learning distinction is the most fundamental of all the hypotheses in Stephen Krashen’s theory and the most widely known among linguists and language practitioners.

(2) The monitor hypothesis

The monitor hypothesis explains the relationship between acquisition and learning and defines the influence of the latter on the former. The monitoring function is the practical result of the learned grammar.

(3) The natural order hypothesis

The natural order hypothesis is based on research findings (Stephen Krashen, 1988; et al.) which suggested that the acquisition of grammatical structures follows a “natural order” which is predictable.

(4) The input hypothesis

The input hypothesis is Stephen Krashen’s attempt to explain how the learner acquires a second language. In other words, this hypothesis is Stephen Krashen’s explanation of how second language acquisition takes place.

(5) The affective filter hypothesis

The affective filter hypothesis embodies Krashen’s view that a number of “affective variables” play a facilitative, but non-causal, role in second language acquisition. These variables include motivation, self-confidence and anxiety.

### **3. Teaching strategies in second language acquisition**

#### **3.1 Strategy 1: Analyzing characteristics of the second language learners**

Generally speaking, there are more effective and less effective students in classrooms for learning the second language. Teachers should educate different language learners in accordance with their special characteristics and offer an individualized quality education or modify different way of teaching to suit the special requirements of the second language learners. Many researchers found a great number of learner characteristics so as to identify different strategic techniques associated with different second language learners. Hosenfeld fleshed out the characteristics by using verbal reports or think-aloud protocols to investigate learners’ mental processes while they worked on language tasks. These studies were followed by the work of Stern and Todesco, which further pursued the notion that second language learning ability resides at least in part in the teaching strategies used by different teachers. Some characteristics of the more successful and less successful learners are identified as follows:

- (1) Is an active or passive learner;
- (2) Can or can not monitor language production;
- (3) Can or can not practice communicating in the language;
- (4) Can or can not use prior linguistic knowledge;
- (5) Can or can not use various memorization techniques;
- (6) Can or can not ask for clarification;
- (7) Whether or not there is language anxiety occurring when a learner is expected to perform in second language learning;
- (8) Can or can not be influenced by self-esteem, shyness, stage fright, embarrassment, test anxiety, social evaluative anxiety and communication apprehension;
- (9) Whether or not worry about making mistakes in second language learning;
- (10) Whether or not worry about the consequences of failing the second language class;
- (11) Whether or not worry about getting nervous and confused in language class;
- (12) Whether or not feel self-conscious about speaking the second language in front of classmates;
- (13) Whether or not feel heart pounding when I am going to be called on in language class;
- (14) Whether or not thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course;
- (15) Whether or not worry about feel confident while learning the second language.

#### **3.2 Strategy 2: Signing classroom contracts to build the language learners’ expectation toward independence**

Traditionally, teachers shouldered much of the responsibility for learning in the classroom. However, in a language classroom the teacher and students should share responsibility. The teacher takes on the role of model and facilitator, and the students increase their role as active participants who are ultimately responsible for their own learning.

A classroom contract consists of an agreement between teacher and language learners or students regarding how each will contribute to and behave in the classroom. Contracts are most successful if students provide the input on the agreement with guidance from the teacher.

Language learners in different classes may come up with different characteristics, which are fine, because the point is that a sense of trust and shared responsibility has been established between teacher and language learners. Hang the posters in the classroom as reminders of the contract and for future reference. For example, if a characteristic of a good learner is to complete homework on time, then the teacher can refer to the contract if there is a problem with a student's attitude toward homework. The responsibility for the students' action has shifted completely to the language learner because he or she has agreed to behave in a certain manner.

### **3.3 Strategy 3: Creating the learner-centered classroom to set students' learning responsibilities**

Learning a language is like playing on a soccer team. The teacher is the coach who presents different kinds of plays, gives advice and opportunities for practice, and provides feedback and support when it comes time to play a game. Students are the team players who actually play and must make decisions and evaluate themselves during the game. In the learning process, the teacher can guide, facilitate, present materials clearly and answer questions, but the teacher cannot learn the language for students or even make students learn the language. Students must decide themselves that they want to learn, and they need to take initiative for seeking opportunity for learning. The Chinese proverb "Give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime", which can also illustrate how the classroom should operate. The teacher gives students learning tools that they will always be able to use to learn a language.

A learner-centered classroom is an environment that creates and fosters independent students who are aware of their learning processes and who, through this awareness, are able to take control of their learning. A learner-centered classroom must initially be created by the teacher and then accepted by students. It does not occur automatically, but rather must be worked at so that all participants support the environment and are supported by the environment. Students whose learning abilities and strategies are acknowledged and encouraged will embrace strategies instruction as a way to further their own independence as active thinkers. However, the stage needs to be set in order for strategies instruction to occur successfully. Following are examples of activities shared by teachers who have successfully created learner-centered classroom.

### **3.4 Strategy 4: Setting goals for the language learners to lead to increased motivation**

A crucial step toward a learner-centered classroom is getting students involved in learning by having them set language goals for themselves. Having the language learners set personal language goals increases their involvement by increasing the stake they have in the learning process. Giving students the opportunity to establish their own goals, in addition to or in collaboration with those set by the instructional program, allows students to reflect on their reasons for learning a second language, which may in turn lead to increased motivation.

Goals can be either long-term or short-term. Students have written down their personal language goals on a piece of paper. Collect these and create lists of long-term and short-term goals on the board to stimulate class discussion. Long-term goals are usually a result of students' motivations for choosing the language of study. Short-term goals, which are set more often, are used as enabling steps toward long-term goals. For example, if a

student's long-term goal is to be able to read detective novels in the second language, then he or she may focus on short-term goals such as reading short detective stories and focusing on vocabulary related to law enforcement and crime. Short-term goals are generally more immediately reachable than long-term goals

### **3.5 Strategy 5: Integrating theories of second language acquisition with practice**

Theory is vital for teachers because it provides insight into why language learners respond to instruction in certain ways. Understanding Stephen Krashen's theory can help teachers develop appropriate instructional teaching strategies and assessments that guide students along a continuum of language development, from cognitively undemanding, context-embedded curricula, to cognitively demanding, context-reduced curricula. However, it is more and more important to unite theory with practice as follows:

#### (1) Strategy of the acquisition-learning hypothesis

According to Stephen Krashen there are two independent systems of second language performance: "the acquired system" and "the learned system". The "acquired system" or "acquisition" is the product of a subconscious process very similar to the process that children undergo when they acquire their first language. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language—natural communication—in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances, but in the communicative act. The "taught system" or "teaching" is the product of formal instruction and it comprises a conscious process that results in conscious knowledge "about" the language, for example knowledge of grammar rules. According to Stephen Krashen "learning" is less important than "acquisition".

#### (2) Strategy of the monitor hypothesis

The acquisition system is the utterance initiator, while the teaching system performs the role of the "monitor" or the "editor". The "monitor" acts in a planning, editing and correcting function when three specific conditions are met: that is, the second language learner has sufficient time at his/her disposal, he/she focuses on form or thinks about correctness, and he/she knows the rule. It appears that the role of conscious learning is somewhat limited in second language performance. Stephen Krashen suggests that there is individual variation among language learners with regard to "monitor" use. He distinguishes those learners that use the "monitor" all the time (over-users); those learners who have not learned or who prefer not to use their conscious knowledge; and those learners that use the "monitor" appropriately. An evaluation of the student's psychological profile can help to determine to which group they belong. Usually extroverts are under-users, while introverts and perfectionists are over-users. Lack of self-confidence is frequently related to the over-use of the "monitor".

#### (3) Strategy of the natural order hypothesis

For a given language, some grammatical structures tend to be acquired early while others late. This order seemed to be independent of the learners' age, background, conditions of exposure, and although the agreement between individual acquirers was not always 100% in the studies, there were statistically significant similarities that reinforced the existence of a natural order of language acquisition. Stephen Krashen however points out that the implication of the natural order hypothesis is not that a language program syllabus should be based on the order found in the studies. In fact, he rejects grammatical sequencing when the goal is language acquisition.

#### (4) Strategy of the input hypothesis

The input hypothesis is only concerned with "acquisition", not "learning". According to this hypothesis, the learner improves and progresses along the "natural order" when he/she receives second language "input" that is one step beyond his or her current stage of linguistic competence. Since not all of the learners can be at the same level of linguistic competence at the same time, Stephen Krashen suggests that natural communicative input is the

key to designing a syllabus, ensuring in this way that each learner will receive some input that is appropriate for his or her current stage of linguistic competence.

(5) Strategy of the affective filter hypothesis

Stephen Krashen claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can combine to “raise” the affective filter and form a “mental block” that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. In other words, when the filter is “up” it impedes language acquisition. On the other hand, positive affect is necessary, but not sufficient on its own, for acquisition to take place.

**3.6 Strategy 6: Building second language learner motivation including value, self-efficacy and attributions**

Learners’ motivation, through complex and multifaceted, is critical for all types of learning. Motivation affects how hard students are willing to work on a task, how much they will persevere when they are challenged, and how much satisfaction they feel when they accomplish a learning task. Good teaching strategies can increase students’ motivation for second language learning tasks. Value, self-efficacy and attribution are several critical components that play a great role in second language learner motivation.

(1) Value: Second language learners are more motivated on tasks that they value. They may value a task because they find it intrinsically interesting, or because they find it applicable to their lives. Teachers try many ways to gain students’ intrinsic interest in academic tasks, including using authentic literature, choosing activities that might be fun for students, and focusing on content that has cultural relevance.

(2) Self-efficacy: Self-efficacy is the specific confidence that one is capable of successfully completing a particular task. Students with self-efficacy have confidence that they can solve a problem. They believe that the more they learn and practice, the more their capabilities will improve, and they understand that mistakes are just a part of learning. In contrast, students with low self-efficacy think that they have inherent low ability. They believe that effort will reveal their own inability and they choose easy tasks to try to avoid making mistakes. In the second language learning research, building students’ self-efficacy can help them understand that they are capable of solving problems when they use the correct tools.

(3) Attribution: Students’ approach to school tasks can depend on the factors to which they attribute their success or failure. Language learners often attribute performance to natural ability, luck and outside influences such as a good or poor teacher. These are factors that are largely perceived as out of the learner’s control. Less often, students may attribute school success to effort or even more appropriately, to effective strategies. Students’ attributions for success or failure evolve over a long time and are difficult to change. On the way to the second language learning, teachers should ensure that students experience meaningful successes with teaching strategies by providing authentic, appropriately challenging tasks and by teaching strategies explicitly so that students know how to apply them. Teaching strategies can be quite powerful in building students’ motivation for the second language acquisition.

**4. Conclusion**

Teachers should understand the development stages and Stephen Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition and apply some teaching strategies in the language classrooms. They can identify the strategies that

best meet their language learners' immediate needs, and they can explore students' reaction to their learning approaches for the second language. Moreover, they can use classroom research as a tool for showing the language learners that the teaching strategies in second language acquisition really work.

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