How Languages are learned by P. Lightbown & N. Spada

Chapter 7: Popular ideas about language learning revisited

This chapter discusses and reflects on several opinions about how languages are learned.

# 1: Languages are learned mainly through imitation

Difficult to support the idea that languages are learned mainly through imitation. Learners produce sentences they have not heard before. They are making sentences by understanding how the language system works.

Imitation still has a role to play in language learning e.g. when small children are learning their L1. They selectively imitate certain words and structures.

* Imitation may be an individual learning strategy, but not a universal strategy.
* Imitation is important in developing pronunciation and intonation.
* New learners learn when making themselves understood in meaningful interaction.

# 2: Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors

The correction of grammar varies based partly on the children’s age, and partly on the parents’ linguistic, social and educational background. Observations show that parents tend to focus on correcting meaning rather than form.

The case for L2 learners is different. There’s evidence that suggests that without corrective feedback and guidance, second language learners may continue certain ungrammatical forms for years.

# 3: Highly intelligent people are good language learners

Having a high IQ can be an advantage when learning grammar rules and vocabulary items. But in natural language learning settings, and in a classroom focusing on interactive language use, research shows that learners with a wide variety of intellectual abilities can be successful language learners.

* Students should not be excluded from opportunities to learn an L2 on the grounds that they do not have the academic ability to succeed.
* Language teaching should be differentiated to fit the children’s abilities.

# 4: The best predictor of success in second language acquisition is motivation

Learners who want to learn tend to do better than those who do not. But highly motivated learners can encounter difficulties and challenges in language learning.

Teachers have no influence over learners’ intrinsic motivation for learning a second language.

* Teachers can motivate by creating a safe learning environment in which students are stimulated and engaged to learn by taking their conditions for learning into consideration.

# 5: The earlier a second language is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning

The research evidence is strong that those who begin second language learning at age young age are most likely to eventually be indistinguishable from native speakers.

* Disadvantage of an early start on L2 language learning: It could mean that children have little opportunity to continue developing their L1.
* Research shows that a good foundation in a child’s L1 including literacy, is a sound base to build on.
* All school programmes should be based on realistic estimates of how long it takes to learn a second language. Two hours a week - even for seven or eight years – won’t be enough.

# 6: Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language

We should recognize that knowledge of one or more languages can contribute positively to L2 learning. If the languages are relatively close, there is much that the learners already know for instance the alphabet and basic principles of syntax. On the other hand, transferring patterns form one’s L1 can cause some major errors in learner language.

Similarities in the L1 and L2 may be difficult to overcome, especially when learners are frequently in contact with learners who make the same errors.

The L1 is not the only influence on the L2. Learners form different backgrounds often make the same kind of errors, and some of these errors are very similar to the errors made by L1 learners.

* In such cases, L2 errors are evidence of the learner’s efforts to discover their structure of the target language itself rather than attempts to transfer patterns from their L1.

# 7: The best way to learn new vocabulary is through reading

This statement is true. But it does not tell the whole story. Reading is a major source of vocabulary growth. L2 learners can also expand their vocabulary through reading. But a L2 learner won’t read the same amount of text in the target language as the L1 learner.

* L2 learners benefit from opportunities to read material that is interesting and important to them. But it should include guidance in reading (reading strategies)
* In order to successfully guess the meanings of new words in a text, a reader usually needs to know 90 % or more of the words in the text.

# 8: It is essential for learners to be able to pronounce all the individual sounds in the second language

Research on pronunciation has shown that second language speakers’ ability to make themselves understood depends more on their ability to reproduce the phrasing and stress patterns – the *melody* of the language.

# 9: Once learners know roughly 1000 words and the basic structure of a second language; they can easily participate on conversations with native speakers

Conversational language involves a limited number of words and sentences. However, learners will find it easier to understand and to make themselves understood if they also understand some *pragmatic* features of the target language.

* Cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings even when the words and syntax is correct. Therefore, the pragmatic competence is important.

# 10: Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practice examples of each one before going on to another.

Second language learning is not linear in its development. Learners may use a certain form accurately at *stage a*, but then later fail to produce the form at *stage b*, and then start to produce the form accurately again at *stage c.*

* Some structure-based approaches to teaching are based on this (before mentioned) false assumption that L2 development is a sort of accumulation of rules
* Using a linear structure can make the students forget the language features learned in one of the early *stages*.

# 11: Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones

No matter how the L2 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.

Teachers must be aware, that some linguistic forms are rare in the classroom language that learners have little opportunity to hear, use or learn them if the teacher does not provide them.

# 12: Learners’ errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.

Errors are a natural part of language learning. Errors reflects the patterns of the learners’ developing interlanguage systems.

Teachers have responsibility to help learners do their best. Therefore, they should provide explicit, form-focused instruction and feedback on error.

* When errors are persistent, it is important to bring the problem to the student’s attention.
* Too much feedback om errors can have a negative effect on motivation and teachers must be sensitive to their student’s reaction.

# 13: Teachers should use materials that expose students only to language structures they have already been taught

Such a procedure can provide comprehensible input, BUT – given a meaningful context – learners can comprehend the general meaning of oral and written text tat contain vocabulary and structures that they have not yet mastered.

* There will be a loss of motivation if the students are not sufficiently challenged.

It would be a disservice to students to use such materials exclusively or even predominantly.

* Students should be exposed to a variety of forms.

# 14: When the learners are allowed to interact freely (for example, in group or pair activities), they copy each other’s mistakes

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

* Learners do not produce any more errors in their speech when talking to learners of similar levels, than they do when speaking to learners at a more advanced level

Group and pair work, used in combination with individual work and teacher-centered activities, plays an important role in language teaching and learning.

# 15: Students learn what they are taught

Teachers know from experience that students do not learn what they are taught (!) More important is the fact that they eventually know far more than they are taught directly.

Some aspects of the L2 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’.

* Attempts to teach aspects of language that are too far away from the learner’s current stage of development will usually be frustrating.

Learners can learn a lot 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.

* 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

This kind of feedback (‘recasts’) has been found to be the most common type of feedback in second language classrooms. It has the advantage of not interrupting the flow of the interaction. Especially adult learners are responsive to this kind of feedback.

Research in which learners interact individually with interlocutors (a person who is taking part in the conversation; a ‘middleman’) has also shown that recasts are perceived as corrective feedback, even though learners may not always know which language feature is being corrected.

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

# 17: Students can learn both language and academic content (for example, science and history) simultaneously in classes where the subject matter is taught in their second language

Motivation is increased when the material that is used for language teaching has an inherent value to the students.

* It creates a genuine need to learn the language.
* Content-based instruction is usually associated with the opportunity to spend more time in contact with the target language, without losing out on instruction in the other subject matter.
* Experimental studies in which an element on form focused instruction was added to the content-based instruction have shown that, with guidance, students can improve these areas as well.
* Both students and teachers need to keep in mind that content-based language teaching is also language teaching.