



## Applied Second Language Acquisition

One of the best ways to be a good language teacher is to know about the theory and principles of language teaching and learning. However, it can often be difficult to see the relationship between the theory you are learning and the teaching you are doing. This module focuses on the theory and principles of second language acquisition (SLA) so you will understand why learning languages is not like learning other content and how you can use that knowledge to improve your teaching.

### Content Presentation

The content presented in this module begins with a questionnaire where you will indicate whether and to what extent you agree or disagree with twenty statements related to SLA. Your experiences in English teaching and in learning your host country language will likely influence how you answer each question. This questionnaire is for your reflection only and your answers do not need to be shared.

The text following the questionnaire reflects the general consensus of linguistic experts about each statement. Although the evidence for some statements is better substantiated than for others, language acquisition is a complex process so the evidence is rarely 100% conclusive. None of these explanations should be considered definitive. This module is designed to provide some ideas to help you better structure your teaching and an in-depth exploration of this topic is beyond what you need to be successful. If you have a background in linguistics or TESOL and know of a particularly interesting or helpful SLA resource, we encourage you to share that with your fellow Volunteers.

A note on terminology. First, language acquisition and language learning refer solely to human language. Although the communication systems of some animals have some features of human language, to date none have been found to have all the elements of human language. Second, there are many different terms to distinguish the languages in a learner's life; this module uses the broad terms "L1" and "L2" for consistency and simplicity. Here, L1 encompasses the terms native language, first language, and home language while L2 includes the terms second language, target language, and foreign language. Third, because this session is a brief introduction to SLA, we do not address the effects of bi- or multilingualism on language learning. If you want a more in-depth understanding of Second Language Acquisition, we encourage you to do additional research; ask your post's TEFL project staff if you need help identifying appropriate resources.

### Assignment

For this module, you will submit a reflection on your language learning and teaching experiences. The reflection should be based on what you have learned as a language learner at your post and on what you have learned about second language acquisition based on your classroom teaching experiences. The questionnaire activity below may provide some assistance in guiding you to articulate your beliefs. The essay is designed to help you develop your own personal theory about what is important in second language acquisition. Detailed instructions, prompts, and the scoring guide can be found in LearningSpace.

### Second Language Acquisition Activity

Read through each of the statements below and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each. Think about what experiences/evidence you could offer to justify your opinion.

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Learning a second language is the same as learning a first language				
2	Family members usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors				
3	Someone who already speaks a second language will learn another language more easily				
4	Learning a second language is different from learning other academic subjects				
5	Students need to know pragmatics (how language is used) to be able to engage others in that language				
6	The earlier a second language is learned the more likely it is that the student will succeed in learning it				
7	To speak English you need to be familiar with the ways of English speaking cultures.				
8	Mistakes students make are usually due to first language interference				
9	Learners must be able to correctly pronounce all sounds in the second language				
10	Teachers should only use the target language when teaching				
11	Teachers should introduce grammar features one at a time and only move on when those have been mastered				
12	Teachers should teach simpler language forms before more complicated ones				
13	Learner mistakes must be corrected as soon as possible to avoid developing bad habits				
14	Teachers should respond to errors by rephrasing them in the correct form instead of call attention to the mistake				
15	Teacher should avoid materials that include structures students haven't been introduced to				
16	When students practice in pairs or groups, they often learn incorrect forms from each other				
17	Students can learn both a second language and academic content well when the content is taught through the second language				
18	Languages are usually learned through imitation				
19	Much classroom language is not authentic language				
20	Usually, the more distant (different) a language is from your home language the more difficult it is to learn				

### 1. Learning a second language is the same as learning a first language

Almost all linguists accept the view that humans are hardwired to acquire at least one language with little conscious effort. This usually occurs over time through interactions with others, most often during predictable stages in childhood. Children developing a language without consciously working at it and without any attention to form is sometimes identified as “language acquisition.” Consider the complexity of the language produced by a normal four or five year old child – not all of the language produced and understood by the child was explicitly taught. Nevertheless, many linguists and language teachers use “language acquisition” and “language learning” interchangeably, especially in second or foreign language contexts. Some researchers, however, represent “acquisition” as unconscious internalization of language knowledge and “learning” as a conscious process which cannot lead to acquisition.

The critical period hypothesis assumes that if a person does not learn a language before a certain point in their mental development process they will never be able to use it with the same competency as a native speaker who acquired it before the end of the critical period. Modern linguists posit that there may be multiple critical periods but the most recognized critical period occurs around the time of puberty. However, research suggests that even infants begin to lose the ability to make those phonemic distinctions which do not exist in their first language relatively early in their development. And while older learners can be very effective in a second language, with fluency and competency nearly equal to L1 speakers, they may always have some issues with phrasing or pronunciation which manifest as an accent.

Whether an L2 can be considered to be acquired, learned, or some mix of both is still open to discussion among linguists. However, few language teachers would disagree with the idea that exposure to comprehensible input (i.e., language that the learner can understand), immersion in real contexts where the language is used, and activities to solve real communication issues all help learners to internalize the language in ways that are not dissimilar from “acquisition.”

There are some ways in which first and second language learning/acquisition are the same:

- Making errors is a part of learning and people need to try out the language themselves to build an internal representation of it. As they learn, the mistakes they make will change.
- Learners use context clues, background knowledge, and analysis of interactions to understand language.
- The learner’s age is a variable which affects competency.
- Learners can comprehend more language than they may produce.
- Learners may overgeneralize vocabulary and rules, applying them in broader contexts than where they are appropriate.

However, there are some ways in which L1 and L2 learning/acquisition are different:

L1	L2
Acquisition happens naturally.	Often requires conscious effort.
The acquisition process is based on the neural hardwiring of humans.	L1 can be used as a basis for learning L2; this can have both positive and negative implications.
Children spend years listening to the language, babbling, and using telegraphic speech before being able to form sentences.	Learning for older learners is more rapid. For example, they begin to form sentences quickly.
Young children can learn another language with little conscious effort and are less affected by making mistakes but their level of cognitive development prevents them from benefiting from more formal approaches to language instruction.	Older learners can use metacognitive strategies to support learning. They can analyze and manipulate grammar structures and they can describe how the language works.

## 2. Family members usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors

Family members provide their children with massive amounts of first language input. They do correct children's language production but the correction usually occurs when the utterance is difficult to understand, a word choice is wrong, or the child's language is impolite or inappropriate. In fact, correction of grammar usually occurs when the feature is stigmatized (e.g., she ain't) or non-standard (e.g., him and me are going down to the store). Otherwise, children's grammar errors are typically not corrected.

## 3. Someone who already speaks a second language will learn another language more easily

This is true because the learner has two language systems to draw on when learning a third. The learner will come to the learning task with the awareness that not all languages are structured in the same way. Also, if a learner has learned systems for describing language, such as formal grammar, much of that system may also be applied to learning a third language. Finally the learner will likely be more tolerant of the ambiguity that is inherent in all human languages.

## 4. Learning a second language is different from learning other academic subjects

This statement is generally accepted. A second language is partially acquired through hardwiring rather than solely through explicit instruction. The ability to learn other academic subjects, on the other hand, is in no way hardwired. In addition, when someone is learning chemistry, math, or history, they only need to learn the content because they already have proficiency in the language which is delivering the content. Learning languages is more complicated because the learner simultaneously has to process the *form* of the communication and, at the same time, has to process the *meaning* of the communication.

## 5. Students need to know pragmatics to be able to engage others in that language

Human communication almost always takes into account the roles of those speaking and the appropriate language for the circumstance. One stereotype that many Americans have about themselves and their communication preferences is that Americans just say what they mean without any sugarcoating. However, if you say "move" instead of "excuse me" on a crowded city sidewalk in America you will likely experience very different outcomes. Therefore, language teachers should think about how different contexts, role relationships, and levels of imposition (e.g., a big or small favor?) affect language choices in order to help learners navigate a variety of situations and produce the social outcomes they desire.

## 6. The earlier a second language is learned, the more likely it is that the student will succeed in learning it

We often hear people say that children are like sponges who just absorb languages. To an extent this is true because children have not yet passed some critical periods (see 1 above). Generally, the younger a child is, the less likely they are to speak the L2 with an accent. Children may also be less self-conscious than adults and be more willing to use language even when others witness their errors. Because of this, there was a 20<sup>th</sup> century tendency to push L2 instruction into the earliest grades assuming that children would absorb and retain the language regardless of how and how much they were exposed to it.

However, a young child who only has one or two hours of classroom language learning per week may never have enough exposure to the L2 to acquire it and may forget it if the exposure stops. Children who only encounter the language in the classroom may not be motivated to learn because they may not see value in it. Many modern school systems have therefore decided that within formal learning settings (i.e., schools), the best approach is to introduce the L2 in the later primary grades, middle school, or even secondary school. As a natural result of aging, older learners may have lost some of the brain plasticity (the brain's ability to restructure itself to acquire or improve an ability) that existed when they were younger. However, they can still succeed in language learning because they have not passed all critical periods, can apply conscious learning strategies, and may have practical uses for the language to motivate their learning.

### 7. To speak English you need to be familiar with the ways of English-speaking cultures

This is a tricky statement. Many people effectively communicate in English without knowing much about English-speaking cultures. On the other hand, communicating with others often requires making assumptions about what is appropriate, polite, and reasonable. So while no English language learner needs to be an expert on any English-speaking culture (e.g., U.S., British, South African), it is certainly important to make students aware of common cultural understandings that tend to run across different English speaking communities even if they may not always be the rule.

### 8. Mistakes are often due to first language interference

Mistakes do often occur because the learner is using a structure or word in the L2 that either doesn't exist (e.g., Understand you me?) or means something completely different (e.g., "pie" means "foot" in Spanish and is a baked pastry dish with filling in English) in their L1. However, errors can occur when the L1 and the L2 have the same structure. There is also some evidence that there is a hierarchy of difficulty across some language features, where some features are difficult for all students to learn regardless of their L1.

### 9. Learners must always be able to pronounce all sounds in a second language correctly

Most linguists would disagree with this for two reasons. First, pronunciation can vary among native speakers. This can be due to the position or emphasis of the word in the utterance or due to multiple acceptable pronunciations. Second, all speech has disfluencies (e.g., starts, stops, accidental pronunciations). Competent speakers of a language all have the capacity to sort through disfluencies in context when listening to that language. Research has shown that teaching appropriate pausing, phrasing, and stress patterns are more important for improving learner comprehensibility than stressing phonemic differences (e.g., sheep vs. ship, liver vs. river) that a learner may learn to produce but may never be able to hear because they have already passed the relevant critical period.

### 10. Teachers should only use the target language when teaching

There is debate around this statement. The appropriateness of L1 use in the classroom often depends on the intent of the communication. A student providing a quick L1 translation of a word or expression to make sure they understood is a good language learning strategy. However, a student using the L1 just to chat with a friend is not appropriate L1 use.

It makes sense to expose students to as much of the L2 as possible in the classroom if they do not receive much input or interaction elsewhere. Some argue that it is especially important for the procedural language (i.e., for directions and classroom management) to be in the L2 so that the students will see that it can be used to carry out real world communication. However, some experts feel that a strict insistence on using only the target language stigmatizes the students' L1. Moreover, there are some circumstances when using the students' L1 makes sense. First, when a one word translation can move the class (and learning) along instead of having to stop for a potentially confusing paraphrase. Second, when an idiom in the L2 can be explained through a comparable idiom or a short phrase in the L1. Third, when the content is simply too advanced for learners to process in the L2.

As Volunteers, you are likely providing your students with the most authentic communication in English that they have ever encountered. Giving directions and feedback in English will make the language real. Similarly, English practice activities should occur mostly in English but you may choose to tolerate a limited amount of L1 use in groups or discussion activities, especially if the content is new or challenging.

### 11. Teachers should introduce grammar features (e.g., tenses, articles) one at a time and only move on when those have been mastered

It is important to understand that in learning, particularly language learning, sometimes mastery only occurs after many different exposures over an extended period of time. With languages, sometimes a grammar feature thought to have been mastered can later become a source of error. This is the result of the language becoming more complex with many rules interacting and becoming seemingly contradictory. The learner may misuse a feature previously mastered either because they are concentrating on another element that is more important to them at the moment or because additional knowledge has changed the student's perception of the feature.

Teachers often misjudge how much students can process and give more material to learn than they can actually process. Consequently, few language classrooms provide students with adequate opportunities to practice. A good rule for all teachers is "do less and do it more thoroughly." On the other hand, focusing too much on practice is also problematic. Spending too much time reviewing and practicing a grammar feature because the students have not mastered it can be counterproductive and cause negative associations and emotions. To avoid over emphasis, select a grammar feature to be the focus of the lesson but not the only focus. Also, make an effort to review previously taught grammar features along with the new ones to help students see how the features relate (and do not relate) to each other.

### 12. Teachers should teach simpler language forms before more complicated ones

As a general rule this statement is hard to dispute. Certainly a beginner should not be introduced to relative clauses or the past conditional. However, more complicated forms that are communicatively relevant either to the students' lives or to the lesson being studied should not be excluded simply because they are difficult. If a form has high utility for a learner, its complexity can be more manageable. A relative clause in a dialogue for beginning students (because it is appropriate and authentic language) might receive a brief explanation but no focus or practice. If there is a valid communicative reason for peripherally introducing a more complicated form, use it and give a simple explanation of it, but don't spend time practicing it and don't ask students to demonstrate that they can use it.

### 13. Learner mistakes must be corrected as soon as possible to avoid developing bad habits

Do not correct every single mistake that a student makes. Correcting a mistake as soon as it is made may distract the student from the task they are trying to complete. Learning a language is so complex that a single mistake hardly implies a bad habit or even a bad habit beginning to develop. It is much better to correct a mistake when you hear or see it more than once because it might be becoming a habit.

Mistakes that are important to correct quickly include:

- Mistakes that impede the ability to understand what was said or written
- Mistakes that are related to the target feature (the teaching point) of the lesson
- Mistakes that can be related to previous lessons

Mistakes you might choose not to correct include:

- Mistakes that do not impede communication (e.g., He go to work at 3:00.)
- Mistakes that have little relation to the lesson

There are often benefits to delayed correction (i.e., waiting until the student finishes speaking or after all students have completed the activity):

- Students are not distracted from completing the task at hand.
- The teacher has more time to think of an effective way to discuss the mistake.
- If a student's mistake is corrected when they make it, the class may assign ownership of the mistake to that student whereas reviewing that mistake generally with the whole class gains the attention of more students.

**14. Teachers should respond to errors by rephrasing them in the correct form instead of calling attention to the mistake.**

A teacher rephrasing a student statement in the correct form is called a “recast.” Research shows that recasts are probably the most common type of classroom error correction. They are likely the most common because the most immediate response to a mistake is to provide the correct form. Recasts do not call a lot of attention to the mistake itself so they are less embarrassing for the learner. Research has indicated that when the activity is focused on form, students typically perceive recasts as feedback and make adjustments accordingly. When the activity in class is focused on content, students often hear a recast as the teacher repeating their answer as confirmation and validation, so they believe the error they produced is correct. To reduce ambiguity in a recast, teachers should emphatically stress the word or phrase that contained the mistake.

**15. Teachers should avoid materials that include structures that students haven’t been introduced to yet**

(See 11 and 12 above.) This largely depends on how many new structures are being introduced and how quickly they are being introduced. For example, it is well-established that if students are not able to understand at least 90% of the words in a reading passage, comprehension will break down. Similarly, if a school requires that teachers cover a textbook chapter every class (a common occurrence), students’ cognitive processing capacity is overwhelmed and they learn little. However, introducing a more complicated form in the final activities of a unit, for example introducing the past perfect during a lesson on the simple past, may actually stimulate student curiosity and interest in the new form.

**16. When students practice in pairs and groups, they often learn incorrect forms from each other**

Although the research is not conclusive, it does suggest that students don’t learn incorrect forms from each other during pair and group work. There are a number of contributing factors to explain this. First, students are often so concerned about their own production that they give relatively little attention to others. Second, most language students tend to be wary of accepting the production of another student as the exemplar. Finally, learning incorrect forms can be reduced when the teacher regularly models pair or group work before starting, monitors student language during group work, and finally reviews high-frequency mistakes with the whole class at the activity’s end.

The value of practice time far outweighs any particular mistake that one student might pick up from another. More practice helps students become aware of the rules of the L2 and more comfortable using it. Working in pairs and groups before interacting with the teacher or answering questions in the whole class also helps to build student confidence.

**17. Students can learn both a second language and academic content well when the content is taught through a second language**

Content-based instruction (CBI) tends to increase motivation and creates a genuine, immediate need to learn the language in order to access the content. CBI also creates situations where students get to use language to solve real problems. Since the vocabulary provided through CBI is what is most needed to learn and work with the particular content, it is usually more varied and relevant than what appears in most language lessons. Research has shown that CBI and immersion instruction increase vocabulary, improve comprehension, and build communicative competence. However, some studies suggest that students may express themselves in the L2 with less accuracy when accuracy is not essential for successful communication.

### 18. Languages are usually learned through imitation

Imitation does not seem to be a significant element of language learning. Many language learners can produce novel sentences that they have never heard anyone use. They can also identify patterns in language and use them in new contexts. Even when young children imitate, they tend to selectively imitate specific words and phrases rather than every utterance they have heard. The amount that a child imitates language seems to have little effect on how quickly they learn it. There is also little evidence that rote memorization, recitation of dialogues, and drills contribute much towards language learning and use.

### 19. Much classroom language is not authentic language

Most classroom language is giving or clarifying instructions, asking for participation, evaluating participation, and giving explanations. Some of the least authentic language can be found in teacher-centered classrooms with the typical interaction pattern called IRE: I = initiation (the teacher asks a question), R = response (the student responds), and E = evaluation (the teacher says if the response was correct). It is not authentic language to ask a question, encourage our partner to make a comment or offer an opinion, then let our partner know how good we thought their contribution was.

Many of your daily activities are transactional (e.g., seeking information, expressing desires, negotiating transactions) or interpersonal (e.g., developing relationships, seeking support, sharing ideas). You read to be informed or to use social media and you move on when you either have sufficient information or lose interest. But when you read a text or watch a video in the classroom, some type of follow up is necessary so that you can demonstrate what you learned; this is not a very realistic next step in real life.

One way to make classroom language more authentic is to focus on common communicative situations. Teachers can help students acquire language to successfully navigate these situations and by presenting communication problems which resemble the ones that they typically need to solve.

### 20. Usually the more distant (different) a language is from your home language the more difficult it is to learn

Both research and common sense suggest that the closer the L2 is to your L1, the easier it will be to learn. While writing systems are not language but a representational system for a language, learning a new writing system with a new language will take more time than if it uses a writing system similar to the L1's. For example, English speakers are likely to find French, a language which shares many roots and a writing system with English, easier to learn than Mandarin Chinese, a tonal language with a different writing system.