

Recent Research in Second Language Acquisition

Outcomes: In this segment we will review the recent research in second language acquisition and how it is influencing ESOL curriculum development.

Although Stephen Krashen hypothesized about the role of comprehensible input in language learning, he didn't sufficiently operationalize his theories for researchers to test them. While many believed the theories to be true, it remained unclear how a teacher would intentionally create this "comprehensible input".

The work of linguist Michael Long picks up where Krashen left off. Michael Long is a professor in second language acquisition at the University of Hawaii.

Michael Long is well known for his "Interaction Hypothesis". Accepting the idea that comprehensible input leads to language acquisition, Long has researched how to best make that comprehensible input happen. According to Long, input becomes comprehensible when learners contemplate and negotiate meaning through interaction with others.

Creating a classroom environment focused on interaction among students is crucial. With that environment, specific strategies can be used to make the interaction even more comprehensible and enable students to acquire language more easily.

Long suggests the following strategies which allow learners to make adjustments in conversation to increase comprehensibility:

- confirmation checks
- comprehension checks
- clarification requests
- self repetitions
- other repetitions

Reflection: How would a teacher incorporate this into the classroom daily?

Building on the work of Michael Long, Teresa Pica, a linguist from the University of Pennsylvania and Catherine Doughty, a linguist from the University of Hawaii, further define Long's conversational adjustments in the classroom setting. Based on this work, the following is recommended:

1. Confirmation checks: Encourage ESOL students to repeat a portion of what he or she has heard with rising intonation, with or without a tag question. (*The girl?* or *The girl, right?*)
2. Comprehension checks: Encourage ESOL students to use words and expressions such as *right?* *OK?* and *Do you understand?*
3. Clarification requests: Show ESOL students how to use wh- questions, yes/no questions to request new information or to further explain information they received, but do not understand. (*What do you mean by... I don't understand. Do page 5?*)
4. Self-repetitions: Show ESOL students how to repeat key words of their own utterances when interacting with their classmates, particularly when they learn a new word through conversation. (*My favorite class is...mathe, mathe, yes, mathematics. My favorite class is mathematics.)*)
5. Other repetitions: Show ESOL students how to repeat the key words of others when interacting. (Student A: *I think the answer is one-fifth.* Student B: *No, it's not one-fifth, it's one sixth.*)

To summarize, if comprehensible input leads to second language acquisition AND interaction makes input comprehensible, then we can assume that interaction promotes second language acquisition.

Reflection: How and when do you see yourself teaching your students to use Long's conversational adjustments?

While second language learners acquire a great deal of language without instruction, what role does direct language instruction play in second language acquisition? This topic is being addressed by the research of Long and Doughty, both of whom are applied linguists at the University of Hawaii.

Long and Doughty initiated an view of second language acquisition called "Focus on Form". Focus on Form states that learning occurs when problems arise in student communication and are resolved. This happens when language is being used in context – which is the optimal time for a student's mind to be open to making sense of new vocabulary or language structures.

What does this mean for teachers? Taking advantage of the teachable moment as it arises is very effective. When students are interacting, encourage them to interact until meaning is made clear. As students are negotiating meaning, teachers should note that this is the optimal time to provide the essential grammar, syntax, and vocabulary necessary for meaning to be made clear. This way of "focusing on form" in context promotes second language acquisition.

Let's look at a brief example from an ESOL classroom during the language arts block.

The traditional approach of teaching vocabulary, grammar, or syntax in isolation, devoid of meaningful context has **NOT** been shown to promote language acquisition.

The research of Long and Doughty is impacting ESOL curriculum writing as well as the development of teaching strategies which allow teachers to differentiate for English language learners. Throughout the remaining modules, you will become familiar with the implementation of these theories into practice.

Reflection: How does the work of Long and Doughty change or strengthen your thoughts on language acquisition?