

# IV-B. Study Circle on Second Language Acquisition

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# Study Circle on Second Language Acquisition

## Facilitator Guide

### Introduction

The purpose of this study circle is to read and discuss second language acquisition (SLA) theory and research and to evaluate its applications to adult education practice. Participants will read two CAELA publications about SLA, explore the meaning and applications of SLA research to adult ESL instruction, implement at least one new research- or theory-based strategy in their teaching, and reflect on the impact of that experimentation on their thinking and practice.

### Readings

- ▶ *Beginning to Work With Adult English Language Learners: Some Considerations*, by MaryAnn Cunningham Florez and Miriam Burt, describes SLA theory and suggests several theory-based teaching strategies. [www.cal.org/caela/esl\\_resources/digests/beginQA.html](http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/beginQA.html)
- ▶ *Second Language Acquisition in Adults: From Research to Practice*, by Donna Moss and Lauren Ross-Feldman, describes SLA research and offers research-based strategies. [www.cal.org/caela/esl\\_resources/digests/SLA.html](http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/SLA.html)

### Study Circle Session lengths

**Session 1:** 2 hours

**Session 2:** 1.5 hours

## Session 1: Preparation

Send participants information about the study circle well in advance of the first session. Participants in this study circle should read *Beginning to Work With Adult English Language Learners* before the first session (see Participant Handouts). The accompanying assignment asks them to make note of the theories that resonate with their experiences as *learners* of an additional language. At the beginning of Session 1, they will share one phrase or sentence from the text that captures their experience particularly well, and describe why.

### 1. Opening (5 minutes)

- ▶ Welcome the group and introduce yourself.
- ▶ Review the purpose of this study circle.
- ▶ Review logistical details such as the schedule, breaks, and location of bathrooms.
- ▶ Check that all participants have both readings.

### 2. Participant introductions (15 minutes)

**Format:** Whole group

As noted in the pre-session reading assignment, participants introduce themselves and read a phrase or sentence selected from the first two sections of *Beginning to Work With Adult English Language Learners* and explain how it resonates with their experience as language learners. Remind participants that they have only 1 or 2 minutes for this sharing. There is no discussion during this time; discussion will follow in smaller groups.

### 3. Reviewing the theory (15 minutes)

**Format:** Small groups

During this time, small groups discuss their reactions to what was shared during the introductions and review their understanding of SLA theory. Divide the participants into groups of three and give them these instructions (also post the instructions on flip chart paper):

During the next 15 minutes you will have two related discussions. First, please talk about what struck you about the quotes that were read during the introductions. What stood out for you? Did you find that the quotes about our own learning touched on the full range of SLA theory, or did they cluster around a few key points? (Refer to the readings as needed.) Next, think about the students in your class or program. Which parts of the SLA theory you read seemed most relevant for those students? Discuss any questions you have about the SLA theory described in the first two sections of the reading.

#### 4. Self-assessment (20 minutes)

**Format:** Individual and small group

For this activity, the group skips to the section entitled “What instructional approaches support second language development in adults?” Explain that the groups will be reflecting on their own use of these instructional approaches. Ask participants to read over the 10 suggested approaches and use the self-assessment form to note how comfortable and intentional they are (i.e., how consciously they apply the approaches) in their practice. If there are administrators in the group, they can answer in terms of what they observe in their programs. The ratings are the following:

- 1 – I don’t use this approach.
- 2 – I am not very intentional or comfortable with this approach.
- 3 – I am somewhat intentional or comfortable with this approach.
- 4 – I am very intentional and comfortable with this approach.

Provide these instructions:

When everyone in your group is finished, go down the list and discuss areas of greater or lesser comfort. Discuss any patterns you notice. As you go, share any specific strategies or activities you use to implement the various approaches in your own work, and also any barriers you’ve encountered in trying to use the approaches.

There is no report out from these small groups. You will return to the self-assessments later.

#### 5. Shifting to the research (5 minutes)

**Format:** Mini-lecture

The group will now shift over to the other brief on *Second Language Acquisition in Adults*. Summarize the introduction briefly. Note the three areas of SLA discussed in the research. If definitions are needed, clarify the distinctions among experimental, correlational, and descriptive studies by giving the following information adapted from James Dean and Ted Rodgers, *Doing Second Language Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003):

In descriptive research, no attempt is made to change behaviors or conditions—you measure things as they are. Descriptive studies are also called observational, because you observe without otherwise intervening.

In experimental research, you take measurements or observations, try some sort of intervention, then observe again to see what happened. Some experimental research compares control groups (which do not receive the intervention) with experimental groups (which do receive the intervention).

Correlational research asks, “What is the relationship between two or more variables in a given set of subjects or situations?” Correlational research looks at the degree of relationship between the variables but not the effect of one variable on another variable.

## 6. Focus on the research (25 minutes)

**Format:** Small group

Break the group into three groups, each of which will focus on one area of the research (such as learner motivation, the role of interaction, or the role of vocabulary knowledge in learning). Try to divide the group by interest area, but ask volunteers to move if the groups are too unevenly split. Each group should have some flipchart paper and a marker. Their tasks are as follows:

1. Read the section on your research topic.
2. On flipchart paper, create a chart such as the one below, filling it in with information from the reading.

Research Findings	Related Strategies

3. When the chart has been filled in, discuss your use of these strategies in your own practice, adding other strategies you use that you believe relate to the research.
4. Discuss these questions (posted by facilitator for all groups): Do you see all of these strategies being used in common practice? Are there any that challenge common practice? Are there level-specific applications of these strategies? Population- or context-specific applications?

## 7. Sharing strategies (20 minutes)

**Format:** Whole group

After the groups have posted their charts on the wall, ask participants to walk around and review what other groups have written. Then invite each group to share some thoughts about any of the questions they discussed in Step 4 above.

## 8. Considering application (10 minutes)

**Format:** Individual and then pairs

Ask participants to look over the posted strategies as well as the approaches listed on the self-assessment page and to reflect on which strategy or strategies they'd like to experiment with between sessions. Have them share what they chose and why with a partner. What do they hope happens or changes? After they've talked through their ideas, have them fill out the New Activity Planning Form. Encourage participants to consider peer observation in their plans if there are co-workers in the study circle. (See the Peer Observation Form and How to Conduct Peer Coaching and Mentoring.)

## 9. Closing (5 minutes)

Review the intersession assignment, and show participants the page they will use for their New Activity Notes.

## 10. Evaluation (5 minutes)

Do a quick evaluation to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of the session. Ask participants these questions:

- ▶ What was the most useful aspect of today's session?
- ▶ What might we change if we do this study circle again?

# Session 2: Preparation

Post a flipchart list of the 10 instructional approaches from the self-assessment and the charts that the groups created during Session 1.

## 1. Opening (10 minutes)

Welcome the group back and check on how their activities went. Have them form groups according to the kind of strategy they experimented with between sessions:

- ▶ Strategies related to learner motivation
- ▶ Strategies related to interaction
- ▶ Strategies related to vocabulary development
- ▶ SLA-supportive approaches from the self-assessment chart

## 2. Debriefing the new activities or strategies (25 minutes)

**Format:** Pairs or small groups clustered according to strategy types listed above

Ask participants to refer to their New Activity Notes as they debrief with the following (posted) questions:

- ▶ What did you try? What happened? What factors affected your implementation?
- ▶ What did you conclude from implementing this activity or strategy?
- ▶ What advice would you have for other practitioners about implementing this strategy?

Write the answers to the last question on a sticky note and put it up next to the strategy on the posted flipchart. This advice will be typed up and sent out to participants.

## 3. Reflecting in writing (15 minutes)

**Format:** Individual

Now that participants have tested a new strategy, talked about it with colleagues, and heard about others' activities, they need to consider what's next. Ask them to write for 10 minutes about what they've discovered through their own experimentation or what they learned from the experiences of others, and what they see as their next steps. What new questions have been raised? What other strategies do they want to try? Then invite volunteers to read their writing to the group.

## 4. Cross-cultural issues (35 minutes)

**Format:** Pairs or small groups

There is one section of *Beginning to Work With Adult English Language Learners* that the group has not yet discussed—the section entitled, “What do instructors need to know about culture and working with multicultural groups?”

Introduce this section by reading the opening paragraph to the group.

Have participants return to their small groups. Explain that this part of the text is organized into three bulleted suggestions. For each bullet, they have 10 minutes to read the text and discuss a related question, which will be posted. Each group should have a note taker writing down the group's ideas. Announce when to move to the next bullet and post the next discussion question.

As noted below, the groups will have a chance afterwards to report on key points raised during their discussions. Many creative ideas will emerge. However, there are some key points that you should raise if they have not surfaced naturally during the discussion. These points are noted in italics following each discussion question.



### Discussion questions

1. It can be challenging to be respectful of cultural beliefs and practices while also being careful not to see individuals in terms of cultural stereotypes. Talk about a time you have erred one way or the other. What can you do to avoid this?

*One of the most effective ways to raise awareness of culture and cultural stereotypes is to be mindful of how we talk about our own cultures. For example, we can acknowledge that we live in a multicultural society by remembering to say, “In the dominant culture, it is common . . .” when we talk about the ways that most (but not all) Americans think or behave. To avoid perpetuating cultural stereotypes, we can train ourselves to check in with people (“I’ve heard that, in the Japanese culture, it is considered disrespectful to look the teacher in the eye. Is that true for you?”) rather than assuming that everyone follows these cultural norms.*

2. Try as you might, you cannot anticipate everything that might make others uncomfortable or trigger difficult memories. What can you do if you make that mistake?

*What makes something a “safe” environment will differ from culture to culture; it is helpful to acknowledge this at the beginning of a course and to explain that you will do your best to respond to students’ needs. If you accidentally offend someone or make them uncomfortable, apologize for the distress you have caused and communicate what your true intention was. It is important to respond—do not ignore someone who is upset.*

3. Response time is one way that culture may influence communication style. What other culturally shaped differences have you noticed regarding communication styles or learning styles? How have you worked with these differences?

*This is another topic to talk about at the beginning of a course, with examples of people’s varied ways of communicating and learning. Use humor to illustrate some possible misunderstandings and to convey that, in an ESL class, differences are to be expected. Help students become aware of and articulate their own styles.*

### 5. Strategy sharing (15 minutes)

**Format:** Whole group

For each question, ask the note takers to report on one strategy, issue, or question that was discussed in their groups. When all groups have reported out, use the remaining time for groups to ask each other questions or comment on the issues raised.

## 6. Planning next steps (10 minutes)

**Format:** Whole group

Invite participants to consider how they might continue to support each other as a group. Does the group want to meet again or to stay in touch in other ways? If the group wants to continue to meet, make sure that there is a clear purpose and focus for the meetings. What do they want more time to talk about?

## 7. Closing (5 minutes)

- ▶ Make sure you have contact information so that you can send participants the promised notes. Ask permission to also disseminate a group contact list (and give people a chance to opt out).
- ▶ Thank the group for their work.

## 8. Evaluation (10 minutes)

Ask participants to fill out the Evaluation Form, which asks for feedback about the entire study circle. If there is time, ask volunteers to comment on any aspect of the study circle.

# Beginning to Work with Adult English Language Learners: Some Considerations

*MaryAnn Cunningham Florez and Miriam Burt  
National Center for ESL Literacy Education  
October, 2001*

In many parts of the United States, the number of nonnative adult learners seeking English language instruction is growing. States such as North Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, Nebraska, and Iowa, not historically associated with immigrant influxes, have been experiencing increased growth rates with these populations in the last decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). In 1998, 47% of the participants in federally funded adult education programs were there to learn English as a second language (ESL) (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1999). As immigrant populations seek English language instruction, the need for teachers to serve them is drawing people into the adult ESL teaching field. Some of these teachers have training and experience working with adults learning English. However, many are working with these learners for the first time.

What do teachers who are beginning to work with adult English language learners need to know? This Q&A discusses recommendations in four areas: application of principles of adult learning in ESL contexts, second language acquisition, culture and working with multicultural groups, and instructional approaches that support language development in adults. It is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, it gives teachers an overview of important points, suggests basic strategies to use, and provides resources to consult for further information.

## How do the principles of adult learning apply to adult English language learners?

Malcolm Knowles' (1973) principles of andragogy, the art and science of facilitating adult learning, are still seminal to many of today's theories about learning and instruction for adults.

- ▶ Adults are self-directed in their learning.
- ▶ Adults have reservoirs of experience that serve as resources as they learn.
- ▶ Adults are practical, problem-solving-oriented learners.
- ▶ Adults want their learning to be immediately applicable to their lives.
- ▶ Adults want to know why something needs to be learned.

In general, this picture of the practical, purposeful, self-directed learner is representative of adults, whether they are native or nonnative English speakers. All adult learners need adult-appropriate content, materials, and activities that speak to their needs and interests and allow them to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities.

So what is different for English language learners? Obviously, they need help with the language as they learn content. Teachers working with English language learners also need to think about how Knowles' adult learner characteristics are filtered through culture, language, and experience. For example, it is not uncommon to find nonnative learners who may be hesitant to take charge of their own learning. Their educational experiences in their countries may have taught them that the teacher is the unquestioned expert. They may be resistant to a learner-centered classroom where they are expected to develop goals and work in groups with other learners (Shank & Terrill, 1995).

Nonnative learners also may resist the lifeskill-oriented instruction that is common in many adult ESL programs. Coming from cultures where learning is a high-status, academic endeavor, they may expect a more academically oriented environment (Hardman, 1999). Because of this, teachers should explain to learners why they are learning what they are learning in this new way. Similarly, because many English language learners may have studied English grammar and are familiar with the terms describing language components, instructors should be prepared, when appropriate, to answer learners' questions about sentence structure and vocabulary.

## What do instructors need to know about second language acquisition (SLA)?

Theories about how languages are learned can be complex. However, having some understanding of how people acquire and use languages can be useful to the teachers of adult English language learners.

Second language acquisition theories address cognitive issues (how the brain processes information in general and language in particular), affective issues (how emotions factor into second language processing and learning), and linguistic issues (how learners interact with and internalize new language systems). The following are some suggestions that instructors can use in the classroom. They are drawn from theories of second language acquisition generally accepted as relevant for most second language learners (summarized from Brown, 2001; Lightbown, 2000; Krashen, 1981).

- ▶ **Meaningful interaction and natural communication in the target language are necessary for successful language acquisition.**

Learners need to use the language, not simply talk about it. Give learners opportunities and purposes for communication that reflect or relate to their lives (e.g., role-playing a doctor/patient exchange or creating a chart with information on local medical services). Use authentic materials in activities whenever possible (e.g., listening for details in a recorded telephone message or reading classified ads from the local newspaper).

- ▶ **Effective language use involves an automatic processing of language.**

To become proficient, learners need to move from a concentrated focus on grammar, forms, and structures to using language as a tool to accomplish communication tasks. Think about the purpose of each lesson (e.g., is it important that the learner produce a

specific grammar point or communicate an idea?) and interject error correction to serve those purposes. For example, if the activity is an oral substitution drill practicing the correct use of irregular past tense forms, it is appropriate to correct the verb form being used. However, if the focus of the lesson is making small talk on the job—a communication that involves use of irregular past tense verbs—correction may simply consist of a repetition of the correct form by the teacher (e.g., “I go to a movie last Saturday” is corrected by, “Oh, you went to a movie. What movie did you see?”).

- ▶ **Language learners can monitor their speech for correctness when they have time to focus their attention on form and know the language rules involved.**

Give learners sufficient time for activities, to communicate, and to monitor their performance. Integrate lessons on grammar, structures, and language rules that are relevant to the communication task at hand (e.g., present lessons on imperatives when discussing giving directions) so that learners become familiar with correct structures. Focus activity objectives so that learners are not asked to process and monitor too many points at one time (e.g., asking learners to use new vocabulary and correctly use present and present progressive verb forms in an unfamiliar dialogue format can be overwhelming).

- ▶ **Second language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to language that is at and slightly above their level of comprehension.**

In the materials you use and in your own speech, expose learners to language that is both at and slightly above what they can comfortably understand. Offer a balance of easier reading and listening activities with more challenging ones. Provide pictures, gestures, and prompts when learners are asked to use more complex language.

- ▶ **People have affective filters (created by a variety of factors such as motivation, self-confidence, or anxiety) that can support or disrupt acquisition of a second language.**

Create a classroom environment in which learners feel comfortable using and taking risks with English. Use activities that ask learners to work together or share information to build a sense of familiarity and community. Make sure the physical environment is as comfortable as possible. Avoid constant error correction and include activities that focus on overall ability to communicate meaning. Recycle topics or activities that motivate learners.

- ▶ **There are “interlanguage” periods during which learners make systematic errors that are a natural part of language learning.**

These may be similar to those of a child learning a first language (e.g., adding ed to signify all past tense verbs) or similar to patterns in a learner’s native language (e.g., Spanish speakers placing adjectives after nouns, such as shirt blue). If errors appear to be normal and developmental, provide feedback and modeling of correct structures to support learners as they move through these steps. If an error persists, consider more structured practice on the point.

- ▶ **There is a silent period during which learners are absorbing the new language prior to producing it.**

The length of this period may vary for each learner. Allow learners time to adjust to the new language and begin to internalize its sounds and patterns. Use activities that allow them to demonstrate comprehension without having to produce language (e.g., say new vocabulary and ask learners to hold up picture cards that illustrate each word).

- ▶ **Second language acquisition theories are based on research that investigates specific questions with specific populations in defined circumstances.**

Some theories may be accepted as applicable across populations and contexts; the broad application of others may be debatable. Evaluate how a theory may or may not relate to adult English language learners in general and to learners in your class specifically. Use second language acquisition theories to help make decisions about balancing different language learning activities; observe and respond to learner progress; and set realistic expectations of what learners can accomplish.

## **What do instructors need to know about culture and working with multicultural groups?**

Culture and language are closely related. Learning a new language involves learning about (but not necessarily wholeheartedly embracing) new ways of thinking, feeling, and expressing. This process can put tremendous pressure on an adult who has a well-developed sense of self in the native language and culture. Because immigrants are, to varying degrees and not always consciously, re-configuring their views of themselves in relation to a new social context, they may at times be ambivalent, confused, or even hostile to the process of adapting to a new culture (Ullman, 1997). This includes language learning. Teachers can help ease this process in a variety of ways:

- ▶ Become acquainted with learners' cultures to better understand their perspectives and expectations both inside and outside the classroom (e.g., traditional literacy practices, gender roles, teacher and learner roles, historic interactions with other cultural groups, rhetorical patterns, religious beliefs and customs). Avoid generalizing and stereotyping learners. Acknowledge and respect differences. When discussing cultural differences and traditions in class, focus on descriptions rather than judgments.
- ▶ Learners may not be willing or able to participate in activities that involve discussion of taboo subjects, revelation of personal information, or reliving of painful experiences. For example, a refugee who lost family in a war may be very uncomfortable when a teacher asks learners to bring in pictures of their families for an activity. Be aware of the possible implications of activities or topics and offer learners options through which they can respond neutrally, such as bringing a photo of a family from a magazine instead of a personal photo.



- ▶ Remember that culture can play a role in all facets of language, including response time. Many English language learners will come from cultures where silence is not uncomfortable. When this factor is coupled with the reality of a slower processing time for listening comprehension in a second language, it suggests that waiting after asking a question (possibly as long as 10 seconds) before repeating or restating the question is advisable.

## What instructional approaches support second language development in adults?

Adult English language learners come to ESL classes to master a tool that will help them satisfy other needs, wants, and goals. Therefore, they need to learn about the English language, to practice it, and to use it.

A variety of instructional approaches and techniques support language learning and language use (see Crandall & Peyton, 1993). Teachers need to examine these options and decide which approaches are most appropriate for them, their learners, and their settings. The following is a summary of general strategies to use with learners:

- 1. Get to know your students and their needs.** English language learners' abilities, experiences, and expectations can affect learning. Get to know their backgrounds and goals as well as proficiency levels and skill needs.
- 2. Use visuals to support your instruction.** English language learners need context in their learning process. Using gestures, expressions, pictures, and realia makes words and concepts concrete and connections more obvious and memorable. Encourage learners to do the same as they try to communicate meaning.
- 3. Model tasks before asking your learners to do them.** Learners need to become familiar with vocabulary, conversational patterns, grammar structures, and even activity formats before producing them. Demonstrate a task before asking learners to respond.
- 4. Foster a safe classroom environment.** Like many adult learners, some English language learners have had negative educational experiences. Many will be unfamiliar with classroom activities and with expectations common in the United States. Include time for activities that allow learners to get to know one another.
- 5. Watch both your teacher talk and your writing.** Teacher talk refers to the directions, explanations, and general comments and conversations that a teacher may engage in within the classroom. Keep teacher talk simple and clear; use pictures, gestures, demonstrations, and facial expressions to reinforce messages whenever possible. Use print letters, with space between letters and words, and do not overload the chalkboard with too much or disorganized text.

Although it is important for the teacher to understand the structure of the English language, it may not always be appropriate to provide complex explanations of vocabulary and grammar rules, especially to beginning-level learners. In other words, don't feel you have to explain everything at all times. At times it is enough for learners to know the response needed.

- 6. Use scaffolding techniques to support tasks.** Build sequencing, structure, and support in learning activities. Ask learners to fill in words in a skeletal dialogue and then create a dialogue of a similar situation, or supply key vocabulary before asking learners to complete a form. Recycle vocabulary, structures, and concepts in the course of instruction. Build redundancy into the curriculum to help learners practice using learned vocabulary or skills in new situations or for different purposes.
- 7. Bring authentic materials to the classroom.** Use materials like newspapers, signs, sale flyers, telephone books, and brochures in the classroom. These help learners connect what they are learning to the real world and familiarize them with the formats and information in such publications. However, do prepare learners beforehand (e.g., pre-teach vocabulary) and carefully structure lessons (e.g., select relevant, manageable chunks of the authentic material) to make this work.
- 8. Don't overload learners.** Strike a balance in each activity between elements that are familiar and mastered and those that are new. Asking learners to use both new vocabulary and a new grammatical structure in a role-playing activity where they have to develop original dialogue may be too much for them to do successfully.
- 9. Balance variety and routine in your activities.** Patterns and routines provide familiarity and security and support learners as they tackle new items. But English language learners, like all learners, have a variety of preferences for processing and learning information. They also can get bored. Give learners opportunities to experience and demonstrate their mastery of language in different ways. Challenge them with activities that speak to their lives, concerns, and goals as adults.
- 10. Celebrate success.** Progress for language learners can be slow and incremental. Learners need to know that they are moving forward. Make sure expectations are realistic; create opportunities for success; set short-term as well as long-term goals; and help learners recognize and acknowledge their own progress.



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## Second Language Acquisition in Adults: From Research to Practice

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December, 2003

Second language acquisition (SLA) is the study of how second languages are learned and the factors that influence the process. SLA researchers examine how *communicative competence*—the ability to interpret the underlying meaning of a message, understand cultural references, use strategies to keep communication from breaking down, and apply the rules of grammar—develops in a second language (Savignon, 1997). They also study nonlinguistic influences on SLA such as age, anxiety, and motivation. (See Ellis, 1997; Gass & Selinker, 2001; & Pica, 2002 for extensive discussions of SLA theory and research.)

Little research has been conducted on SLA with English language learners in adult education contexts. The complexities of adult English as a second language (ESL) instruction make research in this field challenging. Investigating issues of culture, language, and education and tracking learner progress over time are not easy when complicated by diverse and mobile learner populations and varied learning contexts (e.g., workplace classes, general ESL classes, family literacy classes). However, knowing about the SLA research that has been conducted can be helpful to adult ESL teachers because the findings may be applicable to their populations and contexts.

The purpose of this Q&A is to show how SLA research can inform adult ESL instruction. Research in three areas of second language acquisition are discussed: (1) the effect of learner motivation, (2) the role of interaction, and (3) the role of vocabulary. The research presented here includes experimental, correlational, and descriptive studies, as well as theoretical CAEarticles that analyze the results of other research.

### What does research say about learner motivation in SLA?

Motivation has been a focus of SLA research for many years. Dornyei (2002a, p. 8) identifies motivation as “why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity [and] how hard they are going to pursue it.” Linguist Robert Gardner (1985; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003) examined factors that affected French- and English-speaking Canadians learning the language of the other community. His studies support the theory that *integrative motivation* (wanting to learn a language in order to identify with the community that speaks the language) promotes SLA. This motivation seems to promote SLA regardless of the age of the learner or whether the language is being learned as a second or foreign language. Even if individuals do not have this positive attitude toward learning the language, they may have *instrumental motivation*—that is, they may want to learn the language to meet their needs and goals, such as to get a job or to talk to their children’s teachers (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Whatever the learners’ motivation, research seems to support the practice of teachers discovering and responding to learners’ needs and goals when planning instruction (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998; Weddel & Van Duzer, 1997).

Teachers can facilitate motivation by helping learners identify short-term goals and reflect on their progress and achievements. For example, teachers can provide learners with self-assessment checklists to identify skill strengths and weaknesses, weekly checklists to track their progress on meeting a learning goal, and self-reflection tools (e.g., learning diaries) to help learners build autonomy and take charge of their learning (Marshall, 2002).

Recent research looks at how instructional contexts also affect motivation. A learner's motivation may vary from day to day and even from task to task (Dornyei, 2002b; Dornyei & Kormos, 2000). Using varied and challenging instructional activities helps learners stay focused and engaged in instructional content (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998). Research examining how to improve learner motivation suggests that social factors (e.g., group dynamics, learning environment, and a partner's motivation) affect a learner's attitude, effort, classroom behavior, and achievement (Dornyei, 2002b). Therefore, teachers should create an environment that is conducive to learning by encouraging group cohesion in the classroom. Pair and group work activities can provide learners with opportunities to share information and build a sense of community (Florez & Burt, 2001).

Research also suggests that teachers cultivate opportunities that continue to stimulate language use when learners are not in class (Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1994). Project work provides learners with a bridge between practice in and outside of class. In addition, projects provide opportunities for learners to work with others to accomplish tasks, using English in real-life situations (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998).

Research on the relationship between motivation and second language acquisition is ongoing. Current research looks at instructional practices that teachers use to generate and maintain learner motivation and strategies through which learners themselves take control of factors that have an impact on their motivation and learning, such as lack of self-confidence, change of goals, or distractions (Dornyei, 2003; Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 2003).

## What is the role of interaction in SLA?

Another area of SLA research focuses on how interaction contributes to second language acquisition. *Interaction* refers to communication between individuals, particularly when they are negotiating meaning in order to prevent a breakdown in communication (Ellis, 1999). Research on interaction is conducted within the framework of the Interactive Hypothesis, which states that conversational interaction “facilitates [language] acquisition because it connects input [what learners hear and read]; internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention; and output [what learners produce] in productive ways” (Long, 1996, pp. 451–452). Interaction provides learners with opportunities to receive comprehensible input and feedback (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994) as well as to make changes in their own linguistic output (Swain, 1995). This allows learners to “notice the gap” (Schmidt & Frota, 1986, p. 311) between their command of the language and correct, or target-like, use of the language.

Empirical research with second language learners supports the contention that engaging in language interactions facilitates second language development. Findings from a study to determine how conversational interaction affects the acquisition of question formation indicate that

interaction can increase the pace of acquisition (Mackey, 1999). Research on interaction includes studies of *task-based language learning and teaching and focus on form*.

### **What is task-based language learning and teaching?**

Researchers have used tasks to understand both the second language learning and teaching processes (Bygate, 2000). Task-based teaching provides learners with opportunities for learner-to-learner interactions that encourage authentic use of language and meaningful communication. The goal of a task is to “exchange meaning rather than to learn the second language” (Ellis, 1999, p. 193). Research suggests that learners produce longer sentences and negotiate meaning more often in pair and group work than in teacher-fronted instruction (Doughty & Pica, 1986). Interactive tasks may be most successful when they contain elements that

- ▶ are new or unfamiliar to the participants;
- ▶ require learners to exchange information with their partners or group members;
- ▶ have a specific outcome;
- ▶ involve details;
- ▶ center on a problem, especially an ethical one, such as deciding in a small group who should take the last spot in a lifeboat, a nuclear physicist or a pregnant woman; and
- ▶ involve the use of naturally occurring conversation and narrative discourse. (Ellis, 2000)

Teachers can use problem-solving tasks to provide learners with opportunities to share ideas, build consensus, and explain decisions about real-life issues important to them (see, for example, Van Duzer & Burt, 1999).

*Information gap* tasks, in which two people share information to complete a task, can be more structured than problem-solving tasks and give learners an opportunity to ask and answer questions. In one-way information gap tasks, one learner has all the information (e.g., one learner describes a picture while the other draws it). In two-way information gap tasks, both learners have information they must share with the other to complete the task. (See McKay & Tom, 1999, for examples.) When designing tasks, teachers should consider the learners’ language proficiency, goal of the lesson, language to be practiced, skill and content areas, feedback opportunities, and classroom logistics.

### **What is focus on form?**

SLA researchers have examined the role of focus on the grammatical forms of language in instruction. In a focus-on-form approach to language teaching, rather than grammar being taught in isolation, learners’ attention is drawn to grammatical forms in the context of meaningful activities, and the teacher’s attention to form is triggered by learners’ problems with comprehension or production (Long, 2000). An analysis of research studies suggests that instruction that uses a focus-on-form approach—incorporating form with meaning—is as effective as more

traditional grammar-teaching approaches (Norris & Ortega, 2001). Focus on form in communicative lessons can result in learners incorporating new and more correct structures into their language use (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001).

When focusing on form, teachers need to consider learners' needs and goals and their developmental readiness to understand the instruction. Teachers then need to make decisions about the best way to draw learners' attention to a form and provide opportunities for practice of the form in meaningful activities (Doughty & Williams, 1998). For example, in a workplace class with intermediate- or advanced-level learners, a memo from an employer could be used to highlight the use of the passive voice.

## What is the role of vocabulary in SLA?

Word knowledge is an essential component of communicative competence, and it is important for production and comprehension in a second language (Coady & Huckin, 1997). What does it mean to know a word? Vocabulary knowledge is the size of the vocabulary and the depth of vocabulary, which includes knowledge of pronunciation, spelling, multiple meanings, the contexts in which the word can be used, the frequency with which it is used, morphological and syntactical properties, and how the word combines with other words (Qian, 1999).

Recent research has focused on *incidental vocabulary*—vocabulary that second language learners develop while they are focused on a task other than on learning new words (see Gass, 1999, for a summary of research on incidental vocabulary acquisition). However, learners need to understand about 3,000 word families (e.g., the family of “think” includes think, thinks, thought, thoughtful, thoughtfully) in order to understand meaning from context (Laufer, 1997). Teachers can help learners build sight vocabulary by teaching word families and using word association activities such as semantic mapping (DeCarrico, 2001). In semantic mapping, teachers identify key terms in a text and learners list other words in the text that relate to the key terms.

Research also suggests that learners gain vocabulary knowledge through extensive reading. (See Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003, for a detailed discussion of vocabulary knowledge and its relationship to reading in adult second language learners.) Moreover, reading accompanied by vocabulary building activities can increase vocabulary knowledge (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Wesche & Paribakht, 2000). Teachers should include reading opportunities in class and assist learners by selecting texts that are of high interest and level appropriate. They should preview the key vocabulary in a reading passage, teach high-frequency words, and help learners use dictionaries effectively (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003).

Active meaning negotiation seems to have a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition (de la Fuente, 2002; Ellis & He, 1999; Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994). Teachers can provide learners with multiple opportunities to use new vocabulary in tasks such as those involving problem solving and information gap. Teachers can use games such as Bingo, Password, and Concentration and provide tasks for learners to pursue outside of class such as keeping vocabulary journals (learners keep a log of new words they encounter and the strategies they use to learn them).



## Conclusion

Research seems to support many practices that are currently employed in adult ESL instruction. Giving students the opportunity to interact with the teacher and with each other, planning instruction to include tasks that promote these opportunities, and teaching language forms and vocabulary in the context of meaningful learning activities are all ways in which second language acquisition research is applied in the classroom.

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## Notes

# IV-B. Study Circle on Second Language Acquisition

## Participant Handouts

### Readings

- ▶ *Beginning to Work With Adult English Language Learners: Some Considerations*  
[www.cal.org/caela/esl\\_resources/digests/beginQA.html](http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/beginQA.html)
- ▶ *Second Language Acquisition in Adults: From Research to Practice*  
[www.cal.org/caela/esl\\_resources/digests/SLA.html](http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/SLA.html)

### Description

This study circle will be reading two pieces that discuss second language acquisition (SLA): *Beginning to Work With Adult English Language Learners: Some Considerations* describes SLA theory and suggests several theory-based teaching strategies; *Second Language Acquisition in Adults: From Research to Practice* describes SLA research and offers research-based strategies. The study group begins by reading and discussing SLA theory and then examines how the research supports the theory. Participants are expected to reflect on their implementation of at least one strategy in between sessions.

**Where:**

**When:**

## Study Circle Preparation

Before the first meeting of the study circle, please prepare by reading *Beginning to Work With Adult English Language Learners*.

**Task:** As you read this brief, please make notes of ideas that stand out for you or of questions that it raises for you. As you read the first two sections, “How do the principles of adult learning apply to adult English language learners?” and “What do instructors need to know about second language acquisition?” think about your own experience as a language learner. If you haven’t learned an additional language, or if you learned it at a very young age, think about math as an additional language. (Math is the systematic use of symbols to communicate meaning and can be considered a language.) Highlight or make notes about the theories that resonate with your experience. During the first session of the study group, you will be asked to read one phrase or sentence from the text that captures your experience particularly well, and to describe why (in 1 or 2 minutes).

### Self-Assessment on Use of Instructional Approaches That Support SLA

- 1 – I don’t use this approach.
- 2 – I am not very intentional or comfortable with this approach.
- 3 – I am somewhat intentional or comfortable with this approach.
- 4 – I am very intentional and comfortable with this approach.

Instructional approaches that support SLA	Rating
1. Get to know your students and their needs.	
2. Use visuals to support your instruction.	
3. Model tasks before asking your learners to do them.	
4. Foster a safe classroom environment.	
5. Watch both your teacher talk and your writing.	
6. Use scaffolding techniques to support tasks.	
7. Bring authentic materials to the classroom.	
8. Don’t overload learners.	
9. Balance variety and routine in your activities.	
10. Celebrate success.	



## Peer Observation Form

1. What are you looking for?

2. What do you observe?

Discussion of observations with teacher



## Evaluation Form

1. How useful did you find the study circle material? Please explain.
  
2. How useful did you find the study circle meetings? Please explain.
  
3. How useful did you find the activity or strategy (including the documentation)? Please explain.
  
4. What tools or ideas are you taking away that you will continue to use in your practice?
  
5. In what ways are you going to continue to apply research in your practice?
  
6. If this study circle is offered again, what advice would you give the facilitator?
  
7. On what other topics would you like to have a study circle?



# Beginning to Work with Adult English Language Learners: Some Considerations

*MaryAnn Cunningham Florez and Miriam Burt  
National Center for ESL Literacy Education  
October, 2001*

In many parts of the United States, the number of nonnative adult learners seeking English language instruction is growing. States such as North Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, Nebraska, and Iowa, not historically associated with immigrant influxes, have been experiencing increased growth rates with these populations in the last decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). In 1998, 47% of the participants in federally funded adult education programs were there to learn English as a second language (ESL) (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1999). As immigrant populations seek English language instruction, the need for teachers to serve them is drawing people into the adult ESL teaching field. Some of these teachers have training and experience working with adults learning English. However, many are working with these learners for the first time.

What do teachers who are beginning to work with adult English language learners need to know? This Q&A discusses recommendations in four areas: application of principles of adult learning in ESL contexts, second language acquisition, culture and working with multicultural groups, and instructional approaches that support language development in adults. It is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, it gives teachers an overview of important points, suggests basic strategies to use, and provides resources to consult for further information.

## How do the principles of adult learning apply to adult English language learners?

Malcolm Knowles' (1973) principles of andragogy, the art and science of facilitating adult learning, are still seminal to many of today's theories about learning and instruction for adults.

- ▶ Adults are self-directed in their learning.
- ▶ Adults have reservoirs of experience that serve as resources as they learn.
- ▶ Adults are practical, problem-solving-oriented learners.
- ▶ Adults want their learning to be immediately applicable to their lives.
- ▶ Adults want to know why something needs to be learned.

In general, this picture of the practical, purposeful, self-directed learner is representative of adults, whether they are native or nonnative English speakers. All adult learners need adult-appropriate content, materials, and activities that speak to their needs and interests and allow them to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities.

So what is different for English language learners? Obviously, they need help with the language as they learn content. Teachers working with English language learners also need to think about how Knowles' adult learner characteristics are filtered through culture, language, and experience. For example, it is not uncommon to find nonnative learners who may be hesitant to take charge of their own learning. Their educational experiences in their countries may have taught them that the teacher is the unquestioned expert. They may be resistant to a learner-centered classroom where they are expected to develop goals and work in groups with other learners (Shank & Terrill, 1995).

Nonnative learners also may resist the lifeskill-oriented instruction that is common in many adult ESL programs. Coming from cultures where learning is a high-status, academic endeavor, they may expect a more academically oriented environment (Hardman, 1999). Because of this, teachers should explain to learners why they are learning what they are learning in this new way. Similarly, because many English language learners may have studied English grammar and are familiar with the terms describing language components, instructors should be prepared, when appropriate, to answer learners' questions about sentence structure and vocabulary.

## What do instructors need to know about second language acquisition (SLA)?

Theories about how languages are learned can be complex. However, having some understanding of how people acquire and use languages can be useful to the teachers of adult English language learners.

Second language acquisition theories address cognitive issues (how the brain processes information in general and language in particular), affective issues (how emotions factor into second language processing and learning), and linguistic issues (how learners interact with and internalize new language systems). The following are some suggestions that instructors can use in the classroom. They are drawn from theories of second language acquisition generally accepted as relevant for most second language learners (summarized from Brown, 2001; Lightbown, 2000; Krashen, 1981).

- ▶ **Meaningful interaction and natural communication in the target language are necessary for successful language acquisition.**

Learners need to use the language, not simply talk about it. Give learners opportunities and purposes for communication that reflect or relate to their lives (e.g., role-playing a doctor/patient exchange or creating a chart with information on local medical services). Use authentic materials in activities whenever possible (e.g., listening for details in a recorded telephone message or reading classified ads from the local newspaper).

- ▶ **Effective language use involves an automatic processing of language.**

To become proficient, learners need to move from a concentrated focus on grammar, forms, and structures to using language as a tool to accomplish communication tasks. Think about the purpose of each lesson (e.g., is it important that the learner produce a

specific grammar point or communicate an idea?) and interject error correction to serve those purposes. For example, if the activity is an oral substitution drill practicing the correct use of irregular past tense forms, it is appropriate to correct the verb form being used. However, if the focus of the lesson is making small talk on the job—a communication that involves use of irregular past tense verbs—correction may simply consist of a repetition of the correct form by the teacher (e.g., “I go to a movie last Saturday” is corrected by, “Oh, you went to a movie. What movie did you see?”).

▶ **Language learners can monitor their speech for correctness when they have time to focus their attention on form and know the language rules involved.**

Give learners sufficient time for activities, to communicate, and to monitor their performance. Integrate lessons on grammar, structures, and language rules that are relevant to the communication task at hand (e.g., present lessons on imperatives when discussing giving directions) so that learners become familiar with correct structures. Focus activity objectives so that learners are not asked to process and monitor too many points at one time (e.g., asking learners to use new vocabulary and correctly use present and present progressive verb forms in an unfamiliar dialogue format can be overwhelming).

▶ **Second language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to language that is at and slightly above their level of comprehension.**

In the materials you use and in your own speech, expose learners to language that is both at and slightly above what they can comfortably understand. Offer a balance of easier reading and listening activities with more challenging ones. Provide pictures, gestures, and prompts when learners are asked to use more complex language.

▶ **People have affective filters (created by a variety of factors such as motivation, self-confidence, or anxiety) that can support or disrupt acquisition of a second language.**

Create a classroom environment in which learners feel comfortable using and taking risks with English. Use activities that ask learners to work together or share information to build a sense of familiarity and community. Make sure the physical environment is as comfortable as possible. Avoid constant error correction and include activities that focus on overall ability to communicate meaning. Recycle topics or activities that motivate learners.

▶ **There are “interlanguage” periods during which learners make systematic errors that are a natural part of language learning.**

These may be similar to those of a child learning a first language (e.g., adding ed to signify all past tense verbs) or similar to patterns in a learner’s native language (e.g., Spanish speakers placing adjectives after nouns, such as shirt blue). If errors appear to be normal and developmental, provide feedback and modeling of correct structures to support learners as they move through these steps. If an error persists, consider more structured practice on the point.

- ▶ **There is a silent period during which learners are absorbing the new language prior to producing it.**

The length of this period may vary for each learner. Allow learners time to adjust to the new language and begin to internalize its sounds and patterns. Use activities that allow them to demonstrate comprehension without having to produce language (e.g., say new vocabulary and ask learners to hold up picture cards that illustrate each word).

- ▶ **Second language acquisition theories are based on research that investigates specific questions with specific populations in defined circumstances.**

Some theories may be accepted as applicable across populations and contexts; the broad application of others may be debatable. Evaluate how a theory may or may not relate to adult English language learners in general and to learners in your class specifically. Use second language acquisition theories to help make decisions about balancing different language learning activities; observe and respond to learner progress; and set realistic expectations of what learners can accomplish.

## **What do instructors need to know about culture and working with multicultural groups?**

Culture and language are closely related. Learning a new language involves learning about (but not necessarily wholeheartedly embracing) new ways of thinking, feeling, and expressing. This process can put tremendous pressure on an adult who has a well-developed sense of self in the native language and culture. Because immigrants are, to varying degrees and not always consciously, re-configuring their views of themselves in relation to a new social context, they may at times be ambivalent, confused, or even hostile to the process of adapting to a new culture (Ullman, 1997). This includes language learning. Teachers can help ease this process in a variety of ways:

- ▶ Become acquainted with learners' cultures to better understand their perspectives and expectations both inside and outside the classroom (e.g., traditional literacy practices, gender roles, teacher and learner roles, historic interactions with other cultural groups, rhetorical patterns, religious beliefs and customs). Avoid generalizing and stereotyping learners. Acknowledge and respect differences. When discussing cultural differences and traditions in class, focus on descriptions rather than judgments.
- ▶ Learners may not be willing or able to participate in activities that involve discussion of taboo subjects, revelation of personal information, or reliving of painful experiences. For example, a refugee who lost family in a war may be very uncomfortable when a teacher asks learners to bring in pictures of their families for an activity. Be aware of the possible implications of activities or topics and offer learners options through which they can respond neutrally, such as bringing a photo of a family from a magazine instead of a personal photo.

- ▶ Remember that culture can play a role in all facets of language, including response time. Many English language learners will come from cultures where silence is not uncomfortable. When this factor is coupled with the reality of a slower processing time for listening comprehension in a second language, it suggests that waiting after asking a question (possibly as long as 10 seconds) before repeating or restating the question is advisable.

## What instructional approaches support second language development in adults?

Adult English language learners come to ESL classes to master a tool that will help them satisfy other needs, wants, and goals. Therefore, they need to learn about the English language, to practice it, and to use it.

A variety of instructional approaches and techniques support language learning and language use (see Crandall & Peyton, 1993). Teachers need to examine these options and decide which approaches are most appropriate for them, their learners, and their settings. The following is a summary of general strategies to use with learners:

- 1. Get to know your students and their needs.** English language learners' abilities, experiences, and expectations can affect learning. Get to know their backgrounds and goals as well as proficiency levels and skill needs.
- 2. Use visuals to support your instruction.** English language learners need context in their learning process. Using gestures, expressions, pictures, and realia makes words and concepts concrete and connections more obvious and memorable. Encourage learners to do the same as they try to communicate meaning.
- 3. Model tasks before asking your learners to do them.** Learners need to become familiar with vocabulary, conversational patterns, grammar structures, and even activity formats before producing them. Demonstrate a task before asking learners to respond.
- 4. Foster a safe classroom environment.** Like many adult learners, some English language learners have had negative educational experiences. Many will be unfamiliar with classroom activities and with expectations common in the United States. Include time for activities that allow learners to get to know one another.
- 5. Watch both your teacher talk and your writing.** Teacher talk refers to the directions, explanations, and general comments and conversations that a teacher may engage in within the classroom. Keep teacher talk simple and clear; use pictures, gestures, demonstrations, and facial expressions to reinforce messages whenever possible. Use print letters, with space between letters and words, and do not overload the chalkboard with too much or disorganized text.

Although it is important for the teacher to understand the structure of the English language, it may not always be appropriate to provide complex explanations of vocabulary and grammar rules, especially to beginning-level learners. In other words, don't feel you have to explain everything at all times. At times it is enough for learners to know the response needed.

- 6. Use scaffolding techniques to support tasks.** Build sequencing, structure, and support in learning activities. Ask learners to fill in words in a skeletal dialogue and then create a dialogue of a similar situation, or supply key vocabulary before asking learners to complete a form. Recycle vocabulary, structures, and concepts in the course of instruction. Build redundancy into the curriculum to help learners practice using learned vocabulary or skills in new situations or for different purposes.
- 7. Bring authentic materials to the classroom.** Use materials like newspapers, signs, sale flyers, telephone books, and brochures in the classroom. These help learners connect what they are learning to the real world and familiarize them with the formats and information in such publications. However, do prepare learners beforehand (e.g., pre-teach vocabulary) and carefully structure lessons (e.g., select relevant, manageable chunks of the authentic material) to make this work.
- 8. Don't overload learners.** Strike a balance in each activity between elements that are familiar and mastered and those that are new. Asking learners to use both new vocabulary and a new grammatical structure in a role-playing activity where they have to develop original dialogue may be too much for them to do successfully.
- 9. Balance variety and routine in your activities.** Patterns and routines provide familiarity and security and support learners as they tackle new items. But English language learners, like all learners, have a variety of preferences for processing and learning information. They also can get bored. Give learners opportunities to experience and demonstrate their mastery of language in different ways. Challenge them with activities that speak to their lives, concerns, and goals as adults.
- 10. Celebrate success.** Progress for language learners can be slow and incremental. Learners need to know that they are moving forward. Make sure expectations are realistic; create opportunities for success; set short-term as well as long-term goals; and help learners recognize and acknowledge their own progress.



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## Second Language Acquisition in Adults: From Research to Practice

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Second language acquisition (SLA) is the study of how second languages are learned and the factors that influence the process. SLA researchers examine how *communicative competence*—the ability to interpret the underlying meaning of a message, understand cultural references, use strategies to keep communication from breaking down, and apply the rules of grammar—develops in a second language (Savignon, 1997). They also study nonlinguistic influences on SLA such as age, anxiety, and motivation. (See Ellis, 1997; Gass & Selinker, 2001; & Pica, 2002 for extensive discussions of SLA theory and research.)

Little research has been conducted on SLA with English language learners in adult education contexts. The complexities of adult English as a second language (ESL) instruction make research in this field challenging. Investigating issues of culture, language, and education and tracking learner progress over time are not easy when complicated by diverse and mobile learner populations and varied learning contexts (e.g., workplace classes, general ESL classes, family literacy classes). However, knowing about the SLA research that has been conducted can be helpful to adult ESL teachers because the findings may be applicable to their populations and contexts.

The purpose of this Q&A is to show how SLA research can inform adult ESL instruction. Research in three areas of second language acquisition are discussed: (1) the effect of learner motivation, (2) the role of interaction, and (3) the role of vocabulary. The research presented here includes experimental, correlational, and descriptive studies, as well as theoretical CAEarticles that analyze the results of other research.

### What does research say about learner motivation in SLA?

Motivation has been a focus of SLA research for many years. Dornyei (2002a, p. 8) identifies motivation as “why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity [and] how hard they are going to pursue it.” Linguist Robert Gardner (1985; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003) examined factors that affected French- and English-speaking Canadians learning the language of the other community. His studies support the theory that *integrative motivation* (wanting to learn a language in order to identify with the community that speaks the language) promotes SLA. This motivation seems to promote SLA regardless of the age of the learner or whether the language is being learned as a second or foreign language. Even if individuals do not have this positive attitude toward learning the language, they may have *instrumental motivation*—that is, they may want to learn the language to meet their needs and goals, such as to get a job or to talk to their children’s teachers (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Whatever the learners’ motivation, research seems to support the practice of teachers discovering and responding to learners’ needs and goals when planning instruction (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998; Weddel & Van Duzer, 1997).



Teachers can facilitate motivation by helping learners identify short-term goals and reflect on their progress and achievements. For example, teachers can provide learners with self-assessment checklists to identify skill strengths and weaknesses, weekly checklists to track their progress on meeting a learning goal, and self-reflection tools (e.g., learning diaries) to help learners build autonomy and take charge of their learning (Marshall, 2002).

Recent research looks at how instructional contexts also affect motivation. A learner's motivation may vary from day to day and even from task to task (Dornyei, 2002b; Dornyei & Kormos, 2000). Using varied and challenging instructional activities helps learners stay focused and engaged in instructional content (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998). Research examining how to improve learner motivation suggests that social factors (e.g., group dynamics, learning environment, and a partner's motivation) affect a learner's attitude, effort, classroom behavior, and achievement (Dornyei, 2002b). Therefore, teachers should create an environment that is conducive to learning by encouraging group cohesion in the classroom. Pair and group work activities can provide learners with opportunities to share information and build a sense of community (Florez & Burt, 2001).

Research also suggests that teachers cultivate opportunities that continue to stimulate language use when learners are not in class (Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1994). Project work provides learners with a bridge between practice in and outside of class. In addition, projects provide opportunities for learners to work with others to accomplish tasks, using English in real-life situations (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998).

Research on the relationship between motivation and second language acquisition is ongoing. Current research looks at instructional practices that teachers use to generate and maintain learner motivation and strategies through which learners themselves take control of factors that have an impact on their motivation and learning, such as lack of self-confidence, change of goals, or distractions (Dornyei, 2003; Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 2003).

## What is the role of interaction in SLA?

Another area of SLA research focuses on how interaction contributes to second language acquisition. *Interaction* refers to communication between individuals, particularly when they are negotiating meaning in order to prevent a breakdown in communication (Ellis, 1999). Research on interaction is conducted within the framework of the Interactive Hypothesis, which states that conversational interaction “facilitates [language] acquisition because it connects input [what learners hear and read]; internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention; and output [what learners produce] in productive ways” (Long, 1996, pp. 451–452). Interaction provides learners with opportunities to receive comprehensible input and feedback (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994) as well as to make changes in their own linguistic output (Swain, 1995). This allows learners to “notice the gap” (Schmidt & Frota, 1986, p. 311) between their command of the language and correct, or target-like, use of the language.

Empirical research with second language learners supports the contention that engaging in language interactions facilitates second language development. Findings from a study to determine how conversational interaction affects the acquisition of question formation indicate that

interaction can increase the pace of acquisition (Mackey, 1999). Research on interaction includes studies of *task-based language learning and teaching and focus on form*.

### **What is task-based language learning and teaching?**

Researchers have used tasks to understand both the second language learning and teaching processes (Bygate, 2000). Task-based teaching provides learners with opportunities for learner-to-learner interactions that encourage authentic use of language and meaningful communication. The goal of a task is to “exchange meaning rather than to learn the second language” (Ellis, 1999, p. 193). Research suggests that learners produce longer sentences and negotiate meaning more often in pair and group work than in teacher-fronted instruction (Doughty & Pica, 1986). Interactive tasks may be most successful when they contain elements that

- ▶ are new or unfamiliar to the participants;
- ▶ require learners to exchange information with their partners or group members;
- ▶ have a specific outcome;
- ▶ involve details;
- ▶ center on a problem, especially an ethical one, such as deciding in a small group who should take the last spot in a lifeboat, a nuclear physicist or a pregnant woman; and
- ▶ involve the use of naturally occurring conversation and narrative discourse. (Ellis, 2000)

Teachers can use problem-solving tasks to provide learners with opportunities to share ideas, build consensus, and explain decisions about real-life issues important to them (see, for example, Van Duzer & Burt, 1999).

*Information gap* tasks, in which two people share information to complete a task, can be more structured than problem-solving tasks and give learners an opportunity to ask and answer questions. In one-way information gap tasks, one learner has all the information (e.g., one learner describes a picture while the other draws it). In two-way information gap tasks, both learners have information they must share with the other to complete the task. (See McKay & Tom, 1999, for examples.) When designing tasks, teachers should consider the learners’ language proficiency, goal of the lesson, language to be practiced, skill and content areas, feedback opportunities, and classroom logistics.

### **What is focus on form?**

SLA researchers have examined the role of focus on the grammatical forms of language in instruction. In a focus-on-form approach to language teaching, rather than grammar being taught in isolation, learners’ attention is drawn to grammatical forms in the context of meaningful activities, and the teacher’s attention to form is triggered by learners’ problems with comprehension or production (Long, 2000). An analysis of research studies suggests that instruction that uses a focus-on-form approach—incorporating form with meaning—is as effective as more

traditional grammar-teaching approaches (Norris & Ortega, 2001). Focus on form in communicative lessons can result in learners incorporating new and more correct structures into their language use (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001).

When focusing on form, teachers need to consider learners' needs and goals and their developmental readiness to understand the instruction. Teachers then need to make decisions about the best way to draw learners' attention to a form and provide opportunities for practice of the form in meaningful activities (Doughty & Williams, 1998). For example, in a workplace class with intermediate- or advanced-level learners, a memo from an employer could be used to highlight the use of the passive voice.

## What is the role of vocabulary in SLA?

Word knowledge is an essential component of communicative competence, and it is important for production and comprehension in a second language (Coady & Huckin, 1997). What does it mean to know a word? Vocabulary knowledge is the size of the vocabulary and the depth of vocabulary, which includes knowledge of pronunciation, spelling, multiple meanings, the contexts in which the word can be used, the frequency with which it is used, morphological and syntactical properties, and how the word combines with other words (Qian, 1999).

Recent research has focused on *incidental vocabulary*—vocabulary that second language learners develop while they are focused on a task other than on learning new words (see Gass, 1999, for a summary of research on incidental vocabulary acquisition). However, learners need to understand about 3,000 word families (e.g., the family of “think” includes think, thinks, thought, thoughtful, thoughtfully) in order to understand meaning from context (Laufer, 1997). Teachers can help learners build sight vocabulary by teaching word families and using word association activities such as semantic mapping (DeCarrico, 2001). In semantic mapping, teachers identify key terms in a text and learners list other words in the text that relate to the key terms.

Research also suggests that learners gain vocabulary knowledge through extensive reading. (See Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003, for a detailed discussion of vocabulary knowledge and its relationship to reading in adult second language learners.) Moreover, reading accompanied by vocabulary building activities can increase vocabulary knowledge (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Wesche & Paribakht, 2000). Teachers should include reading opportunities in class and assist learners by selecting texts that are of high interest and level appropriate. They should preview the key vocabulary in a reading passage, teach high-frequency words, and help learners use dictionaries effectively (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003).

Active meaning negotiation seems to have a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition (de la Fuente, 2002; Ellis & He, 1999; Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994). Teachers can provide learners with multiple opportunities to use new vocabulary in tasks such as those involving problem solving and information gap. Teachers can use games such as Bingo, Password, and Concentration and provide tasks for learners to pursue outside of class such as keeping vocabulary journals (learners keep a log of new words they encounter and the strategies they use to learn them).

## Conclusion

Research seems to support many practices that are currently employed in adult ESL instruction. Giving students the opportunity to interact with the teacher and with each other, planning instruction to include tasks that promote these opportunities, and teaching language forms and vocabulary in the context of meaningful learning activities are all ways in which second language acquisition research is applied in the classroom.

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## Notes