



# 2

## Second Language Acquisition

“ Words were medicine: they were magic and invisible. They came from nothing into sound and meaning. They were beyond price; they could neither be bought nor sold. ”

—N. SCOTT MOMADAY (KIOWA), *HOUSE MADE OF DAWN*, 1968

“ Language is acquired, whining is learned. ”

—WOODY ALLEN

**In this chapter**, we describe theories about how people acquire a second language, focusing on children and young people learning English in school. The following questions are discussed:

1. What do we know when we know a language? What are some ways experts have defined language proficiency and communicative competence?
2. How does language function as a symbol and instrument of power, social standing, and personal identity?
3. What theories have been proposed to explain first and second language acquisition?
4. What factors have researchers identified as important in acquiring a second language?
5. What are some important social, emotional, cultural, and educational factors that influence English learners' language acquisition experience in school?

**W**e know a young Nicaraguan girl, Judith, who came to California at the age of 7. Her parents struggled to make a living for their seven children, and Judith was quite protective of them, always looking to lighten their load. Once we asked about her younger brothers and sisters, but Judith admonished us never to mention the topic to her mother, who was still grieving the loss of an infant. Judith was virtually non-English speaking in the third grade; her English grew very slowly in her fourth and fifth grades, though her native language remained fluent: She could make up extensive and complex Spanish stories on the spot, given a patient audience. For a long while we didn't see Judith, but then we happened to visit her school one day. We entered the main office to check in, and there answering the telephone in fluent English was Judith, now a sixth grader, who had earned the prestigious job of student assistant. What a transformation! We greeted her at once and complimented her on her efficient office management skills. And then we just had to comment: "Your English is so good! How did you do it?" With hardly a moment's reflection, she replied: "I waited." And wait she had, a good four years, though much more went into the process than her answer implied.

Judith's story gives a glimpse of second language acquisition from the inside view. In this chapter, we look at how researchers and theorists have described the process. As you read on, you will find that Judith's brief answer carried the weight of truth. There is, of course, more to be said to understand what it is like to learn the language of the school and the larger society as a non-native language. In the following few sections, we first discuss what you know when you know a language, to highlight the complex territory English language learners must cover to become proficient. We next present an overview of first and second language acquisition theories. Finally, we discuss various factors that impinge on the process, including the nature of the language learning situation, the effects of age, the importance of social interaction and "comprehensible input," and the treatment of learner errors.

## What Do You Know When You Know a Language? Defining Language Proficiency as Communicative Competence

In general, language proficiency may be defined as the ability to use a language effectively and appropriately throughout the range of social, personal, school, and work situations required for daily living in a given society. In literate societies, language proficiency includes both oral and written language. For our purposes as educators, we want our students to become competent in four language processes: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Our definition of language proficiency emphasizes not only the grammatical rules governing sounds, word forms, and word orders to convey meaning (phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics) but also knowledge of social conventions of language use (e.g., how to start and end a conversation smoothly; how to enter a conversation without interrupting other individuals; how and when to use informal expressions such as slang as opposed to more formal ways of speaking; how, whether, and when to establish a first-name basis in a formal relationship). Thus as you can see, judgments concerning language proficiency are deeply rooted in social and cultural norms. For this reason, the term *com-*

*communicative competence* is often used instead of *language proficiency* to emphasize the idea that proficient language use extends beyond grammatical forms to include language functions and the social conventions of language to achieve communication (Canale & Swain, 1980; Wallat, 1984).

### **Classroom Example of Language Use in Social Context**

It is important to note that when people use language, they must coordinate all language subsystems (i.e., phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) simultaneously in a way that is appropriate to the social situation to communicate effectively. Let's look at a brief conversation as an example. In Ms. Baldwin's second-grade class, the children have planted a vegetable garden, and a group of eight students is now getting ready to go outside to care for their plants.

TEACHER: Let's get ready to go out to the garden. Who remembers what our vegetables need?

CLASS: Water.

TEACHER: That's right. So I will turn on the hose and each of you will get a turn to water one row. What else do we have to do?

CLASS: Pull the weeds.

TEACHER: OK, anything else?

With this brief example, we can look at how various language subsystems operate simultaneously for communication to be achieved. First of all, the social context, as noted previously, is a second-grade classroom situation, with the teacher in charge of a group of students. The social situation constrains how talk will occur. For example, the conversational structure in this exchange is particular to classroom settings, with the teacher initiating the dialogue and the students responding, often as a group. The children know from experience that in this situation they are free to call out their answers. They are not required to raise their hands to be called on, as they are at other times. The teacher initiates the conversation with two utterances that serve to organize and regulate the behavior of the children as they get ready to go out into the garden. When the teacher asks, "Who remembers what our vegetables need?" her question serves two pragmatic functions. First, the question focuses children's thoughts to regulate their behavior when they go out to the garden. At the same time, the question serves an academic teaching function, which is to review plant knowledge learned recently. We have thus defined the **social context** and examined the **pragmatics** of the utterances in the conversation. All of the teacher's utterances are aimed at essentially the same functions: organizing the children's behavior and reviewing plant care concepts. The children's responses serve to display that they know what to do when they go outside. This sequence, teacher initiation-student reply-teacher evaluation, is typical of classroom conversations (Mehan, 1979).

Now let us look at how these utterances are formed to convey meaning. Languages convey meaning by the systematic and coordinated use of rules governing sounds, including intonation, pitch, and juncture (**phonology**), word formation (**morphology**), and word order (**syntax**). Each language in the world uses a finite set of sounds that make a difference for meaning: **phonemes**. Phonologists demonstrate phoneme differences by examining word pairs with minimal sound differences, such as pin/bin. Because a pin is different from a bin, that is, they have



## Internet Resources

Vivian Cook's site on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Topics ([homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/SLA/](http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/SLA/)) is broken into several major categories which contain several links. Some categories are: Main SLA Approaches, Multicompetence: L2 user theory, Methodology, Learning and using, Bilingualism, Individual differences, Controversial questions, and Language Teaching. This is a valuable site for both students and teachers. You might also explore the ERIC Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics site: [www.cal.org/siteMap.html](http://www.cal.org/siteMap.html).

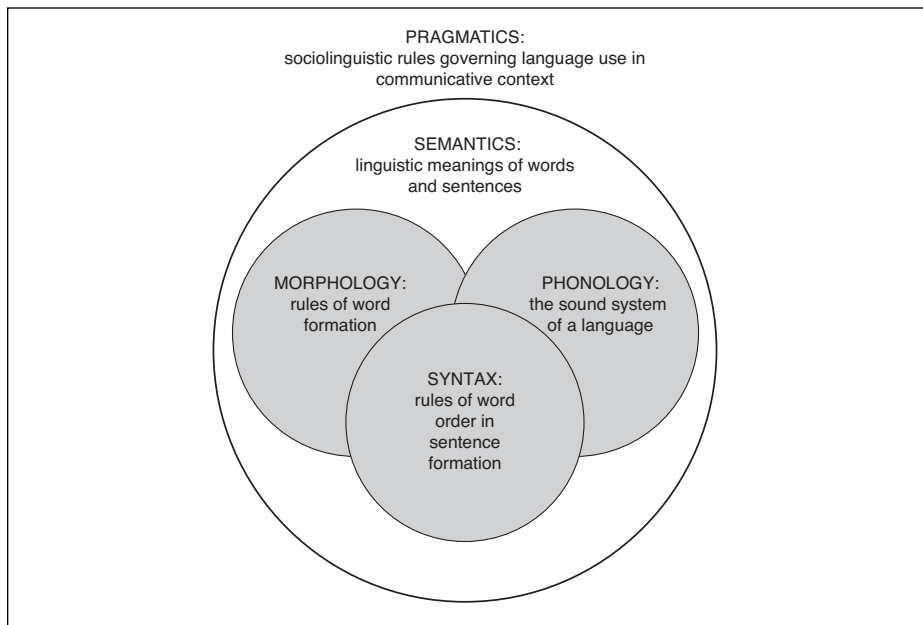
The site contains, among others, short articles on important topics by key writers and researchers. A few categories explored are: assessment, English as a second language, language diversity, technology and language learning, bilingual education, two-way immersion, and second language learning. You might explore one of these topics in preparation for a paper or a presentation in class.

different meanings, we can conclude that the two sounds, /p/ and /b/, are phonemes of English because the sound differences make a difference in meaning. In the previous classroom conversation, the children responded to the teacher that they were going to “pull the weeds.” If they had said “pull the seeds,” varying the response by only one phoneme, it would still make sense but would change the meaning completely, in a way that would be disastrous for the garden! If the children had said “pull the tzekl,” they would have used a combination of sounds that is not English at all. Each language allows certain sound sequences but not others. If the children had said “weeds the pull,” they would not have made any sense because they would have violated English word order rules, or syntax. At the level of morphology, if the children had said “pull the weed” instead of “pull the weeds,” it would not have been quite right because they needed the plural form with the -s suffix rather than the singular to convey meaning accurately. Prefixes, suffixes, and root words are the building blocks, or **morphemes**, from which words are formed. All three rule-governed systems, phonology, morphology and syntax, work together simultaneously to help create meaningful sentences.

So far we have discussed language forms as they combine to convey meanings. The study of linguistic meaning, per se, is yet another area of study called semantics. When linguists study meaning in different languages, they often analyze the lexicon, or vocabulary of the language, examining, for example, synonyms, antonyms, kinship terms, and other aspects of the meanings of words in different contexts. Words and their meanings reflect the physical and cultural realities of the people who use the language. The ways in which languages serve to put meaning at the service of human communication are remarkably complex and interesting though not yet fully understood. Beyond lexical analysis, another way to study meaning is to analyze how languages convey information about actions indicated by the verb, including who or what instigates the action, who or what is affected by the action, where the action takes place, and a number of other cases that describe the meaning relationships among the elements in a sentence (Fillmore, 1968). For example, consider these two sentences:

Diego Rivera painted that mural.

That mural was painted by Diego Rivera.

**FIGURE 2.1**

LANGUAGE SUBSYSTEMS

The action in both sentences is conveyed by the verb *ainted*. The agent is *Diego Rivera*, and the object is *that mural*. Both sentences yield the same semantic analysis, even though they differ grammatically. Our examples provide a simple illustration of a complex and interesting linguistic theory, just to give you a taste of one way linguists have attempted to characterize how languages operate to convey meaning. The exciting part is that thousands of person hours have been spent trying to understand how language works, but even though it is not yet well understood, children the world over have no trouble acquiring their native tongues, and many become bilingual or multilingual!

This discussion of linguistic subsystems is intended to give you an idea of the complex nature of language proficiency. Figure 2.1 summarizes the subsystems of language, with pragmatics as the overarching aspect. This depiction illustrates our view that all language subsystems serve the purpose of communication, for the prime impulse to use language is the need to communicate.

### Literal and Figurative Language

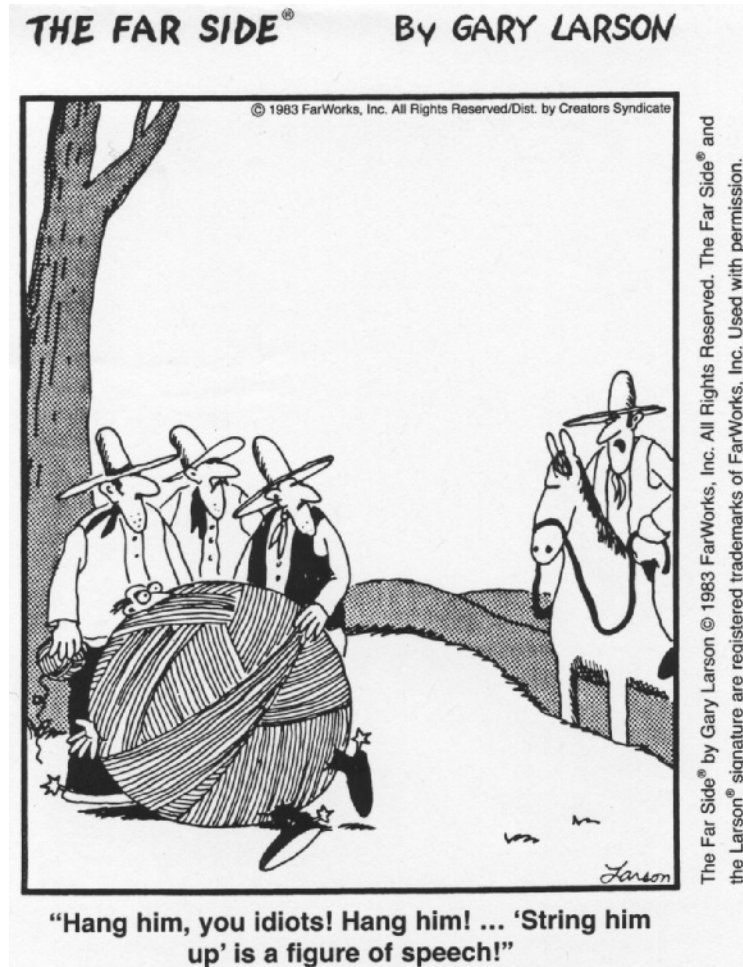
Beyond literal meanings conveyed by words and their sequence in utterances, most of us use figurative language, such as metaphors and idiomatic expressions, every day. I remember my father sometimes saying, “That guy’s a real bird.” I knew that the person described was a bit wacky, but I did not expect him to have wings. Similarly, when someone says, “That car of mine is a real lemon,” we understand that the car breaks down a lot. We do not expect it to produce lemonade. In these examples, *bird* and *lemon* are used metaphorically. Young children and second language learners have to grapple with these nonliteral uses of words as they become proficient speakers of their new language.

We are reminded of our experience teaching English as a second language (ESL) to a group of men from Mexico and Central America who were working in the agricultural fields of California’s central coast. We decided to bring in

some practical material on cars and car buying, so we brought in a book on cars we had at home. We started with a chapter called “How Not to Pick A Lemon.” We hadn’t really given any thought to the title, but the minute we held up the book to introduce the chapter, we had to start by explaining the title. As it happened, all of our students were lemon pickers! They certainly understood the literal meaning of the phrase, and we had a great laugh as we explained its figurative sense. This topic turned out to be one that engaged the most interest that semester. In fact, we ended up giving the book away to one of the students.

Idioms, like metaphors, are fixed expressions whose meaning does not correspond literally to the words that comprise it. Like metaphors, idioms present challenges to young children and second language learners, a topic we address in Chapter 6. As you read the following idioms, visualize both the literal meaning and the figurative one.

- He’s got himself in a real pickle now!
- Everything’s coming up roses.
- No sweat!



Related to idioms are pat phrases or sayings such as the following:

- The coast is clear.
- There's a pot for every lid.
- Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.
- If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

In addition to using figurative language, it is possible to say something but mean its opposite, as in irony or sarcasm. For example, if you have just received notice that your insurance rate has gone up, you might say, "Oh great!" But you really mean "Oh no!" or "Oh how awful!" or perhaps something much more colorful. These examples of nonliteral language illustrate how complex linguistic communication really is.

In summary, language proficiency represents a large and complex array of knowledge. As we have seen, appropriate language use involves both social and grammatical knowledge. People adjust their linguistic style from formal to informal, oral to written, according to their needs and purposes. Fully developed language proficiency, or communicative competence, thus includes the development of a repertoire of oral and written language skills from which to choose to achieve communication across a range of social situations, including academic situations.

Students learning English as a new language face a complex task that must take place gradually over time. Simultaneously, many will also develop and maintain proficiency in their home language, including literacy skills, thereby becoming bilingual and biliterate. For children living in bilingual communities, maintenance of the home language represents a vitally important aspect of communicative competence: bilingual communicative competence (Grosjean, 1982; Romaine, 1989). Consider, for example, the fact that the home language may be a child's only means of communicating with parents or grandparents. As a result, the home language becomes the primary vehicle for the transmission of cultural values, family history, and ethnic identity—the underpinnings of self-esteem (Wong Fillmore, 1991a, 1991b). In addition to the important social and emotional advantages of home language maintenance, research suggests that primary language development supports second language development (Cummins, 1980, 1981) and that bilingualism itself may lead to cognitive flexibility (Hakuta, 1986). Although we focus on second language literacy in this book, we want to underscore the importance of the first language as an integral part of our students' lives, socially, emotionally, cognitively, and educationally.



## **Language, Power, Social Standing, and Identity**

The fact that words may be listed and defined in a dictionary or that pronunciation and grammar rules may be catalogued can draw attention away from the dynamic nature of language. Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that when people communicate via language, they engage in more than an exchange of words: They engage in an exchange of consciousness as meaning is negotiated and understanding achieved or not achieved (Bakhtin, 1981; Moraes, 1996). Words take on different meanings based on the social and power relationships

between speakers. And that meaning is intrinsically related to the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts in which a conversation takes place.

In this section, we briefly discuss how language acts as an instrument of social, cultural, and political power. In this context we bring up the volatile topic of dialect. Finally, we discuss how the mother tongue is deeply connected to personal identity and self-esteem, and how adding a new language involves the forging of new identities (cf. Norton, 1997). Understanding these ideas helps us recognize and honor students' home languages and ways of speaking, while facilitating development of English as an additional language or dialect. Dialect issues are especially relevant because English language development (ELD) classes may include native English speakers who are learning Standard English as a second dialect.

### ACTIVITY 2.1

#### Languages in the Attic: Constructing Your Language Family Tree

One way to recognize and honor students' home languages is through an activity we use in class called Language in the Attic (Murray, 1992), which can be adapted for use with secondary and elementary age students. You start by drawing a family tree on a plain piece of paper, with your name in the center. On one side you list your father's name and then the names of his parents. On the other side you list your mother's name and the names of her parents. Beside each family member, list the language or languages that each one speaks or spoke. Try going back as many generations as you can. What you end up with is your linguistic family tree. Looking at your language family tree, try to answer the following:

1. What circumstances led to maintenance or loss of your "languages in the attic"?
2. What family feelings have you discovered about your ancestral languages?
3. How have education, literacy, and employment in your family contributed to language maintenance or loss?

As you and several classmates share your linguistic family trees, try to identify interesting patterns in language maintenance, shift, and change.

1. How do these patterns reflect social, cultural, economic, and political realities in the lives of your parents and forebears?
2. How do men's and women's or boys' and girls' experiences differ?

Other activities include: (1) making a graph of all attic languages in your class to see how numbers compare; (2) identifying the number of languages that came from each continent in the world; and (3) researching and identifying the world language families represented in the class (cf. Crystal, 1997, or search the Internet with key words "language families"). Finally, don't miss the opportunity to highlight and share feelings of wonder and pride in the linguistic diversity of your particular group of students.



## **Language as an Instrument and Symbol of Power**

Languages don't live in a vacuum. They live, breathe, proliferate, change, and die according to the vicissitudes of the lives of their speakers. For example, the Latin of ancient Rome is no longer spoken, even though it can be studied in its written form. As the Roman Empire spread to parts of Europe, northern Africa, and central Asia, Latin gradually became the dominant language in commercial, legal, and administrative affairs. After Rome fell, Latin had gained such a strong hold in parts of Europe that it remained the primary language spoken even after the Romans lost power. In those areas, Latin gradually evolved into what we know today as the Romance languages: Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, and French. The spread of spoken Latin and also the Roman alphabet to the outlying provinces of the Roman Empire was one of many sociocultural effects of Rome's political domination on the diverse groups of people it conquered.

It is estimated that 4,000 to 8,000 different languages are spoken in the world today (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2003). Mandarin, English, Hindi, and Spanish have the largest number of speakers. Some languages have few speakers, and are therefore at risk of extinction. The languages of the world have been classified into 100 or so overarching language families based on linguistic similarities. Most European languages, including English, belong to the Indo-European language family, which also includes several Germanic and Gaelic languages and all modern languages that have descended from Classical Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit. Other language families include Afro-Asiatic, Amerindian, Austroasiatic, Malayo-Polynesian, and Niger-Congo. Some languages, called isolates, do not seem to fit into any known language family, such as Euskara, the language of the Basque people of the Pyrenees Mountains in France and Spain (Crystal, 1997). Another isolate is Kutenai, the American Indian language of some of my (Suzanne's) ancestors, which is still spoken by a small number of people in Montana, Idaho, and British Columbia. The world's linguistic diversity is truly immense, and it reflects the tremendous diversity of cultures throughout the world.

## **Language or Dialect?**

One reason that numerical estimates of the world's languages vary so widely is disagreement over whether to classify a particular linguistic system as a language or a dialect. Generally, we say that when there are systematic differences in the way different groups of people speak the same language, they are using different dialects or varieties of that language. Systematic differences in phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics have been found, for example, in the English spoken by certain groups of African Americans, American Indians, European Americans, and Latino Americans in the United States (Fromkin et al., 2003). Mutual intelligibility is often cited as a criterion to test whether two language varieties are dialects of the same language. However this test does not always work. For example, the so-called dialects of Chinese are not all mutually intelligible, yet they are generally called dialects, except for Mandarin, which is the official language of mainland China. By the same token, languages such as Spanish and Portuguese are mutually intelligible. Yet they are classified as separate languages. In these cases, political status rather than mutual intelligibility plays the deciding role in distinguishing language from dialect, thus the assertion that a language is "a dialect with an army and a navy."

To illustrate how a dialect with an army and a navy assumes power, let's consider Spanish as an example. In this case we will look at a particular dialect of Spanish, Castilian, which became Spain's standard language beginning with several events in 1492. In that year, not only did Columbus claim the New World for Spain, but the Moors were also driven out of Granada, culminating the 700-year struggle to regain the Peninsula from its Muslim conquerors; all Jews were expelled from Spain, except those who were willing to convert to Christianity; and Antonio de Nebrija compiled a Castilian grammar, one of the first modern language grammars ever published. Language, religion, nationhood, and empire coalesced all at once under Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castille. Isabella's dialect (not Ferdinand's) became the standard, rather than Galician or Catalanian or some other Hispanic dialect. As Spain spread its empire to other parts of the world, Spanish supplanted numerous indigenous languages while continuing to evolve. What Rome had done to Spain, Spain was now doing to people in the Americas.

Today the Spanish Empire no longer exists. However as its linguistic legacy, Spanish is spoken by some 310 million people mostly in South America, Central America, North America, and Spain (Katsiavriades, 2000). A correlate of that legacy, however, is the loss and extinction of many indigenous languages, a process that continues today. Because Spanish continued to evolve in the Americas, the standard varieties of Spanish of countries like Argentina, Mexico, and Puerto Rico are different from each other and different from the Castilian spoken in Spain.

In a similar fashion, English spread worldwide with the imperial expansion of Great Britain and the national growth and expanded influence of the United States. Today English is considered a prestigious international language, knowledge of which is said to hold the key to economic opportunity and success as a result of its widespread use in education, government, the mass media, and business throughout the world. Although perhaps true for some, these beliefs suggest that English is one monolithic standard that spreads its influence equally among all. On closer examination, however, we find that this is not so, rather an underlying paradox emerges. Even as knowledge of English opens doors, it can also contribute to significant social, political, and economic inequalities based on the relative prestige of the *variety* of English used, along with a complex array of other factors that affect power relations among individuals, groups, and nations.

To illustrate how language variety relates to power and prestige, a model depicting three concentric circles has been suggested (B. Kachru, 1983). The **inner circle** portrays countries in which English is the primary national language, such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Having originated in England, English migrated with its speakers in centuries past to areas that became inner circle countries. The **outer circle** depicts countries in which English, often coexisting with indigenous languages, is used in major institutions such as education, civil service, and government. In outer circle countries, English was usually imposed during colonial rule and remains in use as a major or official language. The outer circle consists of many countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean and Pacific islands. Outer circle countries include, for example, Ghana, India, Nigeria, Philippines, and Singapore to name just a few. The **expanding circle** includes countries in which English is taught as a second language for international communication purposes but has no role in

domestic institutions, as in Japan, China, Russia, and many European and Latin American countries. The varieties of English used in all three circles have come to be known as World Englishes and have been studied extensively during the past three decades (Y. Kachru, 2005).

Some experts suggest that the spread of English is overall a positive phenomenon because it offers access to a wider world of communication with corresponding personal, social, and economic benefits (B. Kachru, 1983). Others argue that the global expansion of English, together with the emergence of its regional varieties, is largely negative because it contributes to political, social, and economic inequality; primarily to the benefit of inner circle individuals and institutions (Phillipson, 1992). In this view, language is used to maintain the political power, prestige, and hegemony of the inner circle. The sociocultural and political effects of World Englishes are enormously complex, and this discussion barely scratches the surface. To put a face on the topic, we offer the case of Edna Velasco described by Tollefson (2000).

Edna is from the Philippines, an outer circle country, where English is an official language used widely in government, education, business, and mass media. A graduate of a prestigious, private college in the Philippines, Edna was educated *through English* from elementary school through college. Edna is bilingual in Filipino and English, using a variety of English common to highly educated individuals living in and around Manila, the country's capital. When Edna decided to pursue a doctoral degree in applied linguistics in the United States, she was required to pass an English language proficiency test to qualify for admission, which she did. Subsequently, to qualify as a teaching assistant in ESL at the university, she was required to take a test of spoken English, including accent and speaking style. Even though she saw herself as a native English speaker, Edna felt nervous and worried about how the examiners would judge her Filipino English. The fact that she was required to submit to testing illustrates the lower status of her variety of English in this situation. Yet in Philippine society, Edna's English was indicative of high status, opening doors of opportunity economically and professionally.

Edna's case not only illustrates differential language status, but it also points to broader issues in the teaching of English. Which variety of English will we teach and why? Whose English is worthy as a model for English learners and why? How should we address language differences in the classroom that reflect language variety norms as opposed to mistakes of grammar and usage? How and when should students be made aware of different varieties of English? These issues take on greater significance as mobility, immigration, and communication increase around the world, and as speakers of World Englishes come into greater contact with each other, face-to-face and via telephone, television, and the Internet.

In summary, this brief discussion has illustrated several points: (1) how languages migrate, evolve, and change over time; (2) how languages connect with power and may be used to consolidate political hegemony of nations and empires; (3) how political status plays a major role in determining dialect or language status; and (4) how language variety can contribute to the maintenance of social, political, and economic inequalities among users. Thus far in our discussion, we have examined the impact of language varieties across nations. But language varieties occur *within* nations as well, with similar effects on status and power relations, a topic we take up next.

**THE ROLE OF A STANDARD LANGUAGE.** When a dialect comes into power as a standard, its status is usually reinforced by its widespread use in three major arenas: (1) in written media, such as newspapers, magazines, books, and articles; (2) in oral broadcast media, such as radio and television; and (3) in academic settings in both oral and written forms. Connoting higher social and educational status, the standard language becomes an instrument of power for those who use it. At the same time, facility in the standard language may offer access to broader social, economic, and political opportunities. For these reasons, fluency in the standard language is an important educational goal. Optimally, students will maintain fluency in the home language as well, keeping communication lines open with family, friends, and community (Wong Fillmore, 1991a, 1991b), while forging a personal identity that accommodates both languages and cultures.

**MISUSE OF THE TERM DIALECT.** When language scholars use the term *dialect*, they use it as a descriptive term to refer to regional and social variations within a particular language. However, in everyday usage, it often carries a negative, pejorative connotation. Judgments are made about people based on how they speak. To some people the term *dialect* may imply inferiority. Even worse are judgments that the speaker is using bad grammar or lazy pronunciation, when in fact the language they are using is a rule-governed, fully developed linguistic communication system. The fact is that each of us speaks a particular variety or dialect of the language we are born into, and all language varieties are legitimate and equal as communication systems. The social and political reality, however, is that certain dialects carry more prestige and power than others. For example, the ability to use Standard English may offer access to economic, social, and political opportunities, which are otherwise denied. For these reasons, we want all students to develop fluency in Standard English, adding to the home language rather than replacing it.

Making judgments about students' grammar and usage tends to be second nature for many of us. However, it is crucial not to slip into negative, stereotypical judgments based on students' language. This is where ongoing self-reflection and self-awareness are essential. Finally, we must recognize the validity and importance of diverse community languages and language varieties. When students sense that you as the teacher truly recognize and value their home language and culture, they are more likely to feel positive about school and learning. At the same time, you build students' senses of identity and self-worth while creating the effective foundation for students' academic success. Because you as the teacher may represent the new language and culture, your positive attitude may also help students identify more positively with their new language and culture as well.

### **Personal Identity and Ways of Speaking: The Case of Ebonics**

James Baldwin (1924–1987), the brilliant African American novelist and essayist, was eloquent in his use of language. Baldwin grew up in New York City and lived much of his adult life in Paris. He drew on his experiences at home and abroad to develop his essays on racism, language, and power. In 1979, he published an article in the *New Yorker* on the topic of “Black English,” now sometimes

referred to as Ebonics (Baldwin, 1979/1998). In the article, he talks about how one's language is intricately connected to one's identity:

It [language] is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: It reveals the private identity, and connects with, or divorces one from the larger public, or communal identity . . . To open your mouth . . . is (if I may use Black English) to "put your business on the street": You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem and, alas, your future. (p. 68)

In so few words, Baldwin crystallizes what we have taken several paragraphs to try to explain! But why does he say "and, alas, your future"? We interpret this statement as a reference to the way language functions as a gatekeeper, keeping some people down and preventing their access to social mobility and power. This is where access to standard language forms comes in, as noted previously.

So what is Ebonics? Ebonics, or African American language, is a variety of English spoken at least some of the time by many African Americans in the United States. Ebonics has been widely studied, and its particular rules of grammar, pronunciation, and discourse have been described by linguists (e.g., Baugh, 1999; Dillard, 1972; Labov, 1972; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Smitherman, 1986, 1998a,b). Like all other languages, Ebonics has a history that mirrors that of the people who speak it, in this case the descendants of African men and women who were captured to work as slaves on American soil. Because its features draw on and reflect aspects of the Niger-Congo languages spoken in West Africa, some call Ebonics Africanized English (Smitherman, 1998b). Baldwin (1979/1998) suggests that when the slaves were given the Bible by their White masters, the formation of the Black church began, and "it was within this unprecedented tabernacle that Black English began to be formed." Baldwin tells us, "This was not, merely . . . the adoption of a foreign tongue, but an alchemy that transformed ancient elements into a new language" (Baldwin, p. 69). Clearly, Ebonics is a rich and expressive communicative resource, a fully formed language, and hopefully, a source of solidarity and pride for its speakers.

In summary, as human beings each of us is born into a family and community where we acquire basic ways of acting, believing, and making sense of the world around us. The language or languages we use and particular ways of speaking are part and parcel of this sociocultural learning. As children we are all socialized through language, and in the process we acquire it. Because the language we speak is so intricately interwoven with our early socialization to family and community, it forms an important element of our personal identity, our social identity, our racial identity, our ethnic identity, and even our national identity.

Significantly, our first language is often referred to as the mother tongue. We identify deeply with our mother tongue and with our family's ways of speaking: If you denigrate my language, you attack my mother, my father, my family, my neighborhood. As children growing up we become aware, sometimes painfully, of the social status of our ways of speaking. Yet the home language remains an integral part of our identity and may be the only way to communicate with parents and grandparents. As a result, the home language is essential for communicating cultural values, family history, and ethnic pride. Teachers can assist students by recognizing and honoring their home languages and ways of speaking. Finally, it is essential to realize that adding Standard English as a new language or dialect involves much more than learning grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. It also requires the expansion of one's personal, social, racial, and ethnic

identity to make room for the new language and all that it symbolizes and implies. Developing a bilingual, bicultural identity is a dynamic, challenging, and sometimes painful process that continues well into adulthood.

## Language Acquisition Theories

As we proceed with our discussion of how youngsters acquire a second language in school, we must take a moment to summarize basic language acquisition theories related to first and second language development. Our purpose is to acquaint you with those aspects of theory and research that are helpful to teachers in understanding both first and second language learners. It is important to note that neither first nor second language acquisition is yet fully understood. As a result, many controversies and disagreements prevail among experts. For this reason, continued interdisciplinary research in psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and education is needed to help us better understand processes of language acquisition and use. The issues are complex enough to keep many researchers busy for decades, if not centuries, to come. With that, let us summarize some basic theories.

### First Language Acquisition Theories

Our favorite first language learner is our young granddaughter, Hope. When Hope visits us, we enjoy playing hide-and-seek, reading books to her, and just listening to her talk. Recently, while playing a board game with Hope, Grandpa pronounced the *r* in rabbit as a *w*, saying, “It’s a wabbit!” Hope was tickled by this. She immediately grinned with knowing amusement and giggled, “Him don’t say it right!” At 3 Hope was confident enough about her own knowledge of phonology to point out the phonemic impropriety of an adult’s pronunciation. At the same time, she remained oblivious to her own grammatical infelicities. We didn’t correct Hope’s grammar because we assumed that with time she would outgrow that phase to become mature in her language use, and eventually she did. Many parents and grandparents have similar stories to tell.

How do language acquisition theories explain observations such as these? Three basic theories of first language acquisition have been put forward over the years: behaviorist, innatist, and interactionist (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). We now discuss each briefly.

**BEHAVIORIST THEORY.** You are probably familiar with behaviorism as a major learning theory emphasizing stimulus, response, and reinforcement as the basic elements of learning. For language acquisition, behaviorists hypothesized that children learned their first language through stimulus, response, and reinforcement as well, postulating imitation and association as essential processes. For example, to learn the word *ball*, the child would first associate the word *ball* with the familiar spherical object, the stimulus. Next the child would produce the word by imitation, at which time an adult would praise the child for saying *ball*, thereby reinforcing the child’s correct verbal response. Behaviorists assumed that the child’s mind was a *tabula rasa*, a blank mental slate awaiting the scripture of experience.

Behaviorist concepts of imitation and reinforcement could not account for typical child utterances like “Him don’t say it right,” which were clearly not imitations of adult speech. Moreover, behaviorists could not explain how any

novel utterance was produced, even those that were grammatically correct. Yet most utterances we produce in conversation or writing are in fact original. That is, they are not pat phrases we have learned by hearing and repeating. In addition, child language researchers noticed that parents typically reinforce their children for the meaning of their utterances, not for grammatical correctness. These and other concerns were boldly pointed out as Noam Chomsky (1957) engaged in a heated debate with behaviorist B. F. Skinner (1957), attacking behaviorist theory as inadequate to explain observations of child language development.

**INNATIST THEORY.** Chomsky was able to garner some strong arguments against the behaviorist explanation of language acquisition, using examples from children’s developing grammars, such as our example from Hope. Skinner and his behaviorist colleagues were experts in psychology, applying their theories to verbal behavior. Chomsky, on the other hand, was a linguist with a genius for analyzing syntax. In fact, his early work on syntax and transformational grammar revolutionized the field of linguistics (Chomsky, 1957, 1959). Chomsky’s explanations of grammatical rules and transformations became the subject of psychological research on language use in the interdisciplinary field of psycholinguistics.

As Chomsky pondered the complex intricacies of children’s development of grammar, he concluded that language acquisition could only be accounted for by an innate, biological language acquisition device (LAD) or system. Infants must come into the world “prewired for linguistic analysis.” Specifically, Chomsky claims that infants universally possess an innate “grammar template,” or universal grammar, which will allow them to select out the many grammatical rules of the language they hear spoken around them, as they gradually construct the grammar of their mother tongue.

From the innatist perspective, children construct grammar through a process of hypothesis testing. For example, a child may hypothesize the rule that *all* plural nouns end with an *-s*. Thus when they come to a word such as *child*, they form the plural as *childs*, or when they come to the word *man*, they say *mans* for the plural. Gradually, they will revise their hypothesis to accommodate exceptions to the plural rule. Thus children create sentences by using rules rather than by merely repeating messages they have heard, as assumed by behaviorists. This application of rules accounts for the generative nature of language. With a finite set of rules, people can generate an infinite number of novel utterances. Children acquire the rules, according to Chomsky, with little help from their parents or caregivers. But as Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner stated (Gardner, 1995, p. 27), the Chomskyan view is “too dismissive of the ways that mothers and others who bring up children help infants to acquire language.” Gardner argues that, “while the principles of grammar may indeed be acquired with little help from parents or other caretakers, adults are needed to help children build a rich vocabulary, master the rules of discourse, and distinguish between culturally acceptable and unacceptable forms of expression.” This interest in the role of people in the social environment provides the focus of the next theoretical perspective on language acquisition that we discuss, the interactionist perspective. In response to Chomsky’s emphasis on innate grammar mechanisms centered in the infant, interactionists have brought back an interest in the role of the social environment and the influence of parents and caregivers on children’s language acquisition.



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**INTERACTIONIST THEORY.** According to the interactionist position, caregivers play a critical role in adjusting language to facilitate the use of innate capacities for language acquisition. This is in sharp contrast to the innatist view that adapting language has little effect on a child's acquisition process. The interactionist view thus takes into consideration the importance of both nature and nurture in the language acquisition process.

Interactionists study the language mothers and other caregivers use when caring for infants and young children, with special attention to modifications they make during these social interactions to assist children in communication. One strategy often observed between English-speaking, middle-class mothers and their toddlers is conversational scaffolding (Ninio & Bruner, 1978), as illustrated in the following conversation:

CHILD: Birthday cake Megan house.

MOTHER: We had birthday cake at Megan's house. What else did we do at Megan's house?

CHILD: Megan dolly.

MOTHER: Megan got a doll for her birthday, didn't she?

In this conversation, the mother repeats the child's meaning using an expanded form, thereby verifying her understanding of the child's words while modeling adult usage. In addition, the mother assists or scaffolds the toddler's participation in the conversation through prompting questions at the end of each of her turns. In this way, scaffolding provides conversational assistance and focused linguistic input tuned to the child's own interests and language use at that moment. By preschool age, this kind of scaffolded conversation is no longer necessary. Whether scaffolding is actually necessary for language acquisition has not



been verified. In fact, ways in which infants and young children are spoken to varies across cultures (Ochs & Schieffelen, 1984; Schieffelin & Eisenberg, 1984). Nonetheless, caregivers generally facilitate children's vocabulary development, their ability to use language appropriately in social situations, and their ability to get things done through language.

Children's language develops over time, not within a single interaction. As children develop language, they must construct the meanings of thousands of words. Adult assistance in this process is illustrated in the following dialogues, as British linguist M. A. K. Halliday and his wife (1984, 1994) interact with their son, Nigel. This transcript captures Nigel's "ongoing construction" of the concept of cats as it transpired over a period of eight months. In these dialogues, we witness Nigel's semantic development as he both contributes and receives information to help him construct the concept cat.

**Nigel at 2; 10; 22 (2 years; 10 months; 22 days)**

- NIGEL: And you [that is, "I"] saw a cat in Chania Falls.  
 MOTHER: Yes, you saw a cat in Chania Falls.  
 NIGEL: And you picked the cat up. Mummy, do cats like meat?  
 MOTHER: Yes, they do.  
 NIGEL: Do cats like bones? Do cats like marrow?

**Nigel at 3; 0; 26**

- NIGEL: How do the cat's claws come out?  
 FATHER: They come out from inside its paws. Look, I'll show you.  
 NIGEL: Does it go with its claws?  
 FATHER: Not if it's going along the ground.  
 NIGEL: And not if it's climbing up a tree?  
 FATHER: Yes, if it's climbing up a tree it does go with its claws.

**Nigel at 3; 5; 12**

- NIGEL: Cats have no one else to stop you from trossing them . . . cats have no other way to stop children from hitting them . . . so they bite. Cat, don't go away! When I come back I'll tell you a story. [He does so.]

**Nigel at 3; 6; 12**

- NIGEL: Can I give the cat some artichoke?  
 MOTHER: Well, she won't like it.  
 NIGEL: Cats like things that go; they don't like things that grow.

**Nigel at 3; 6; 14**

- NIGEL: I wish I was a puppet so that I could go out into the snow in the night. Do puppets like going out in the snow?  
 FATHER: I don't know. I don't think they mind.  
 NIGEL: Do cats like going out in the snow?  
 FATHER: Cats don't like snow.  
 NIGEL: Do they die? [He knows that some plants do.]

- FATHER: No, they don't die; they just don't like it.  
 NIGEL: Why don't puppets mind snow?  
 FATHER: Well [hesitating] . . . puppets aren't people.  
 NIGEL: Yes, but . . . cats also aren't people.  
 FATHER: No, but cats are alive; they go. Puppets don't go.  
 NIGEL: Puppets do go.  
 FATHER: Yes, but you have to make them go, like trains.  
 NIGEL: Trains have wheels. Puppets have legs.  
 FATHER: Yes, they have legs; but the legs don't go all by themselves.  
 You have to make them go.\*

Halliday (1994) says: “Interpersonally, it (the dialogue) evolves into a dynamic modeling of question, answer, challenge, contradiction, and the like that is the essential component of the resources out of which all conversation is constructed” (p. 79). Most important, this is not talk for talk’s sake but a serious effort over time to build a concept through interaction between parent and child.

As we saw with Nigel, interactions do not necessarily lead to immediate understanding. Rudimentary understandings must be developed and refined over time, often through misunderstandings. For example, during salary negotiations between hockey players and club owners, there was a lot of talk about salary caps. When a sportswriter’s young son heard that the strike had been settled, he asked his father, “Will the players have to wear their salary caps now?” An explanation followed. Children are constantly constructing meaning as they interact with people and the world around them, and through these interactions, they gradually sort out the nuances and construct the multiple meanings of words and phrases. The interactionist perspective acknowledges the important roles of both the child and the social environment in the language acquisition process.

**SUMMARY OF FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORIES.** Table 2.1 summarizes the behaviorist, innatist, and interactionist perspectives on language acquisition by comparing (1) the focus of linguistic analysis, (2) how each theory accounts for the process of acquisition, (3) the role of the child, and (4) the role of the people in the social environment. Of the three approaches, the behaviorist approach, which places primary weight on children imitating what they have heard, has proven least adequate for explaining observed facts in child language development. The innatist view, in contrast, places primary weight on the child, and particularly on innate, biological mechanisms to account for language acquisition. The interactionist perspective, acknowledging both the child’s role and that of caregivers in the social environment, emphasizes the importance of social interactions aimed at communication as the essential ingredient in language acquisition. To the extent that more research is needed on both the biological and social mechanisms in language acquisition and use, innatists and interactionists are likely to add important information to the overall understanding of language acquisition now and in the future.

\*“Listening to Nigel: Conversations of a very small child,” by M. A. K. Halliday, 1984, Sydney, Australia: University of Sydney, Linguistics Department. Reprinted with permission of author.

**TABLE 2.1** • COMPARISON OF BEHAVIORIST, INNATIST, AND INTERACTIONIST THEORIES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

ACQUISITION ASPECTS	BEHAVIORIST PERSPECTIVE	INNATIST PERSPECTIVE	INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE
Linguistic focus	Verbal behaviors (not analyzed per se): words, utterances of child and people in social environment	Child's syntax	Conversations between child and caregiver; focus on caregiver speech
Process of acquisition	Modeling, imitation, practice, and selective reinforcement of correct form	Hypothesis testing and creative construction of syntactic rules using LAD	Acquisition emerges from communication; acts scaffolded by caregivers
Role of child	Secondary role: imitator and responder to environmental shaping	Primary role: equipped with biological LAD, child plays major role in acquisition	Important role in interaction, taking more control as language acquisition advances
Role of social environment	Primary role: parental modeling and reinforcement are major factors promoting language acquisition	Minor role: language used by others merely triggers LAD	Important role in interaction, especially in early years when caregivers modify input and carry much of conversational load

## Second Language Acquisition Theories

Theories about how people learn to speak a second (or third or fourth) language are directly related to the first language acquisition theories described previously. There are two reasons why. First of all, because first language acquisition is a universal achievement of children the world over, researchers and educators interested in second language acquisition and teaching have often used first language acquisition as an ideal model, one that may inform us about how a second language might be taught. Until Chomsky, however, ideas about how a first language was acquired were not fully developed and researched. Behaviorists, for example, did not analyze closely the speech development of young children, but rather extended general learning theory principles to language development.

With the advent of Chomskyan linguistics, however, a whole generation of psycholinguists was inspired to go out and tape record the speech of infants and young children to analyze and describe the process of acquiring their mother tongue. The focus of the research was to describe the grammatical development of young children. Chomsky's contribution to the study of child language was his new way of looking at syntax. Researchers applied his methods of describing syntax to the problem of describing children's interim grammars at different ages and stages of language development. As a result, a remarkable amount of information was generated about first language acquisition in languages as diverse as Turkish,

Mohawk, Spanish, and Japanese. This information provided a natural resource for second language acquisition researchers, not only in terms of theory, data collection, and data analysis, but also in terms of framing the research questions themselves. One of the first questions was simply: Is a second language acquired in the same way as the first? If so, what are the implications for classroom instruction? Because first language acquisition is so successfully accomplished, should teachers replicate its conditions to promote second language acquisition? If so, how? These questions are not fully answered yet but remain pertinent today.

Even as information began to accumulate from the study of child language, however, behaviorist views predominated in educational practice, heavily influencing methods of second language teaching in schools, emphasizing drill and practice of grammatical forms and sentence structures. Meanwhile, as researchers began to go into people's homes to tape record children's speech, the impact of the social environment in various cultural milieus emerged as an interesting variable in language acquisition and use. In fact, some early language acquisition researchers were thwarted in their data-collecting efforts when they discovered that their tape-recording procedures conflicted with cultural norms about how to talk to children! Sociologists and anthropologists were ready to combine their interests and insights about culture and language to inform what became the interactionist viewpoint on language acquisition.

The study of first language acquisition has now emerged as a necessarily interdisciplinary field involving anthropology, psychology, education, and linguistics. As you can imagine, careful attention to social and cultural conventions is essential in investigating how a second language is learned, given the intimate connections between language and culture. In the following section, we will introduce you to how second language acquisition is described and explained from the three perspectives examined for first language acquisition: behaviorist, innatist, and interactionist. We will also discuss their implications for teaching, and then offer a picture of our own understandings of second language acquisition in classrooms. See whether you can identify the theories that we have taken to heart in our viewpoint.

**BEHAVIORIST PERSPECTIVE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION.** Behaviorist theories of language acquisition have influenced second language teaching in a number of ways that persist today in many classrooms. If you have taken a foreign language in high school or college, you are probably familiar with the methods informed by behaviorist learning theories. One behaviorist language teaching method popular in the 1960s is the audiolingual method, in which dialogues are presented on tape for students to memorize, followed by pattern drills for practicing verb forms and sentence structures. Students are first taught to listen and speak and then to read and write based on the assumption that this is the natural sequence in first language acquisition. (This sequence has been disputed, as you will see in Chapter 4.) For behaviorists, the processes involved in second or foreign language learning consisted of imitation, repetition, and reinforcement of grammatical structures. Errors were to be corrected immediately to avoid forming bad habits that would be difficult to overcome later. If you were taught with this method, you may remember the drill-and-skill practice, often carried out via audiotapes in a language laboratory. How well did this instruction work for you? When we ask our students this question in classes of 40 or so, only 1 or 2 report successful foreign language competence acquired through the audiolingual approach.

**INNATIST PERSPECTIVE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION.** Just as Chomsky's theories inspired psycholinguists to record and describe the developing grammars of young first language learners, they also influenced research on second language learning. One such theory put forth to account for second language development was the **creative construction theory** (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). In a large-scale study of Spanish-speaking and Chinese-speaking children learning English in school (Dulay & Burt, 1974), English language samples were collected using a structured interview based on colorful cartoon pictures. Children were asked questions about the pictures in ways that elicited the use of certain grammatical structures. Children's grammatical errors were then examined to determine whether they could be attributed to influence from the first language or whether they were similar to the types of errors young, native English-speaking children make. Data analysis showed that the majority of errors were similar to those made by native English-speaking youngsters as they acquire their mother tongue. Based on these results, the authors proposed that English language learners creatively construct the rules of the second language in a manner similar to that observed in first language acquisition. Dulay and Burt therefore concluded that second language acquisition is similar to first language acquisition.

Dulay and Burt (1974) also used their findings to refute the hypothesis that learner errors will generally be predictable from a contrastive analysis of the learner's mother tongue and the developing second language. Contrastive analysis is a procedure for comparing phonological, morphological, and syntactic rules of two languages (the learner's mother tongue and his or her second language) to predict areas of difficulty in second language development. For example, Spanish creates the plural by adding an *-s* or *-es* ending to a noun (e.g., *casa, casas; lápiz, lápices*). This rule is similar to English pluralization. Thus by contrastive analysis, it would be predicted that plurals in English will not be difficult for native Spanish speakers to learn. When the rules of two languages are quite different, contrastive analysis predicts learner difficulty. For example, Cantonese has no plural marker. The idea of plural is conveyed by context. Thus it would be predicted that Cantonese speakers would have difficulty forming plurals in English. Although predictions based on contrastive analysis sometimes held true in their data analysis, Dulay and Burt found that most English language learner errors among their subjects were best described as similar to errors made by children acquiring English as a first language.

**KRASHEN'S FIVE HYPOTHESES.** Continuing in the innatist tradition, Stephen Krashen (1982) developed a series of hypotheses about second language acquisition that have taken root in the field of second language teaching due in part to Krashen's desire to address classroom second language learning. Krashen's five hypotheses are: (1) the acquisition-learning hypothesis, (2) the monitor hypothesis, (3) the natural order hypothesis, (4) the input hypothesis, and (5) the affective filter hypothesis. Each of these is discussed here.

*The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis.* One of Krashen's first assertions was that there is a distinct difference between acquiring and learning a second language. Acquisition, Krashen asserts, is a natural language development process that occurs when the target language is used in meaningful interactions with native speakers, in a manner similar to first language acquisition—with no particular attention to form. Language learning, in contrast, refers to the formal and conscious study of language forms and functions as explicitly taught in foreign language classrooms.

Krashen goes on to make two claims about the acquisition-learning distinction that have generated considerable controversy in the academic community: (1) that learning cannot turn into acquisition, and (2) that it is only acquired language that is available for natural, fluent communication. Krashen's critics have pointed out that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to detect which system, acquisition or learning, is at work in any instance of language use (McLaughlin, 1987). Furthermore, the two terms require much finer definition to be subjected to experimental study. These criticisms notwithstanding, Krashen's emphasis on second language acquisition by using the new language for relevant communicative purposes has had substantial, positive influence on classroom practice, especially in regard to the move away from the drill-and-practice pattern aimed at language learning.

*The Monitor Hypothesis.* Krashen has suggested that the formal study of language leads to the development of an internal grammar editor or monitor. As the student produces sentences, the monitor "watches" the output to ensure correct usage. For a student to use the monitor three conditions are necessary: sufficient time, focus on grammatical form, and explicit knowledge of the rules. Thus it is easier to use the monitor for writing than for speaking. Krashen maintains that knowing the rules only helps learners polish their language. The true base of their language knowledge is only that which has been acquired. From this assumption, he recommends that the focus of language teaching should be communication, not rote rule learning, placing him in agreement with many second language acquisition and foreign language teaching experts (cf. Celce-Murcia, 1991; Oller, 1993).

*The Natural Order Hypothesis.* According to the natural order hypothesis, language learners acquire (rather than learn) the rules of a language in a predictable sequence. That is, certain grammatical features, or morphemes, tend to be acquired early, whereas others tend to be acquired late. Figure 2.2 illustrates this view.

A considerable number of morpheme studies support the general existence of a natural order of acquisition of English grammatical features by child and adult non-native English learners. However, individual variations exist, as do variations that may result from primary language influence (Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Pica, 1994).

*The Input Hypothesis.* Central to Krashen's view of second language acquisition is the input hypothesis. According to the input hypothesis, the acquisition of a second language is the direct result of learners' understanding the target language in natural communication situations. A key element of the input hypothesis is that the input language must not only be understandable, thus the term **comprehensible input**, but should contain grammatical structures that are just a bit beyond the acquirer's current level of second language development

(abbreviated as  $i + 1$ , with  $i$  standing for input and  $+1$  indicating the challenging level that is a bit beyond the learner's current level of proficiency). Krashen suggests that acquirers are able to understand this challenging level of language input by using context, extralinguistic information such as gestures and pictures, and general background knowledge. In other words, input can be made comprehensible as a result of these extra cues. Moreover, acquisition is facilitated by a focus on communication and not grammatical form.

**FIGURE 2.2 • ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH MORPHEMES**

<b>English morphemes acquired early:</b>	
-ing: Verb ending	John is going to work.
-/s/: Plural	Two cats are fighting.
<b>English morphemes acquired late:</b>	
-/s/: Possessive	We saw Jane's house.
-/s/: Third person singular	Roy rides Trigger.

In summary, according to Krashen, language is acquired (not learned) by understanding input that contains linguistic structures that are just beyond the acquirer's current level of competence ( $i + 1$ ). Speech is not taught directly but emerges on its own. Early speech is typically not grammatically accurate. If input is understood and there is enough of it,  $i + 1$  is automatically provided. According to Krashen, we do not have to deliberately program grammatical structures into the input. Although Krashen's theory is particularly concerned with the grammatical structures contained in the input, vocabulary is also an important element in  $i + 1$ . Krashen emphasizes free-choice reading on topics of interest to students as an excellent way to acquire both vocabulary and other aspects of language.

*The Affective Filter Hypothesis.* Krashen's fifth hypothesis addresses affective or social-emotional variables related to second language acquisition. Citing a variety of studies, Krashen concludes that the most important affective variables favoring second language acquisition are a low-anxiety learning environment, student motivation to learn the language, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Krashen summarizes the five hypotheses in a single claim: "People acquire second languages when they obtain comprehensible input and when their affective filters are low enough to allow the input in [to the language acquisition device]" (Krashen, 1981a, p. 62). For Krashen, then, comprehensible input is the causative variable in second language acquisition. In other words, listening to and understanding spoken language is the essential ingredient in second language acquisition. For this reason, Krashen urges teachers not to force production, but rather to allow students a **silent period** during which they can acquire some language knowledge by listening and understanding, as opposed to learning it through meaningless rote drills.

In summary, Krashen's second language acquisition theories have been influential in promoting language teaching practices that (1) focus on communication, not grammatical form; (2) allow students a silent period, rather than forcing immediate speech production; and (3) create a low-anxiety environment. His notion of comprehensible input provides a theoretical cornerstone for sheltered instruction, or specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE), described in Chapter 3. These practices have benefited students in many ways. More questionable theoretically, however, are his acquisition/learning distinction and the notion that comprehensible input alone accounts for language acquisition. The importance of output, that is, speaking and writing, cannot be ignored in a balanced view of language acquisition (Swain, 1985). Finally, evidence indicates that some grammatical forms may not develop without explicit instruction (Harley, Allen, Cummins, & Swain, 1990).

**INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION.** The idea that comprehensible input is necessary for second language acquisition also forms a basic tenet of the interactionist position. However, interactionists view the communicative give and take of natural conversations between native and non-native speakers as the crucial element of the language acquisition process (Long & Porter, 1985). Their focus is on the ways in which native speakers modify their speech to try to make themselves understood by English-learning conversational partners. Interactionists are also interested in how non-native speakers use their budding knowledge of the new language to get their ideas across and to achieve their communicative goals. This trial-and-error process of give-and-take in com-

munication as people try to understand and be understood is referred to as the **negotiation of meaning**. As meaning is negotiated, non-native speakers are actually able to exert some control over the communication process during conversations, thereby causing their partners to provide input that is more comprehensible. They do this by asking for repetitions, indicating they don't understand, or responding in a way that shows they did not understand. The listener's natural response is then to paraphrase or perhaps use some other cue to convey meaning, such as gesturing, drawing, or modified speech (sometimes referred to as "foreigner talk," which is somewhat analogous to caregiver speech in first language acquisition).

In addition to the importance placed on social interaction, some researchers have looked more closely at output, or the speech produced by English language learners, as an important variable in the overall language acquisition process (Swain, 1985). We have seen that the language learner's output can serve to elicit modification of input from conversational partners to make it more comprehensible.

The three theoretical perspectives bear certain implications for instruction, as outlined in Table 2.2. As you read the chart, you will see how the three theoretical perspectives compare in terms of the source and nature of linguistic input to

**TABLE 2.2** • INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORIES

INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS	BEHAVIORIST	INNATIST	INTERACTIONIST
Source of linguistic input	language dialogues and drills from teacher or audiotape	natural language from the teacher, friends, or books	natural language from the teacher, friends, or books
Nature of input	structured by grammatical complexity	unstructured, but made comprehensible by teacher	unstructured, but focused on communication between learner and others
Ideal classroom composition	all target language learners of similar second language proficiency	target language learners of similar second language proficiency so $i + 1$ can be achieved	native speakers together with target language learners for social interaction aimed at communication
Student output	structured repetitions and grammar pattern drill responses	output is not a concern; it will occur naturally	speaking occurs naturally in communication with others
Pressure to speak	students repeat immediately	"silent period" expected	no pressure to speak except natural impulse to communicate
Treatment of errors	errors are corrected immediately	errors are not corrected; students will correct themselves with time	errors that impede communication will be corrected naturally as meaning is negotiated; some errors may require explicit corrective instruction



learners, ideal classroom composition vis-à-vis native speakers and second language learners, student output, pressure to speak or produce output, and treatment of learner errors.

### **Beyond Social Interaction in Second Language Acquisition Theory**

Social interaction with native speakers represents an important theoretical cornerstone in explaining second language acquisition. However, placing second language learners and native speakers in a room together does not in itself guarantee social interaction or language acquisition. We also need to look closely at the larger social and political contexts in which our students live and learn because they can affect relationships between native speakers and English learners. Who are the native speakers? Who are the English learners? Are the two groups from the same social class or not? Are they from the same ethnic group or not? Will the two groups want to interact with each other? To what extent will particular English learners choose to interact with particular native English speakers and adopt their ways of speaking? How will English learners cross the linguistic, social and cultural boundaries needed to participate socially among native speakers?

Stereotypes, prejudices, and status and power differences may make interaction difficult. Furthermore, natural tendencies to affiliate with one's own linguistic, social, and ethnic group (Sheets & Hollins, 1999) may also work against the kind of social interaction that facilitates language acquisition. Two-way immersion programs described in Chapter 1 represent one of the few educational alternatives that explicitly promote equal status between language minority and language majority students, with both groups learning the native language of the other while developing full bilingualism and biliteracy. Even in multilingual classrooms, however, you are in a position to promote positive social participation through heterogeneous grouping discussed in Chapter 3. To the extent that linguistically, culturally, and academically diverse students are able to work together to accomplish learning tasks, thinking through procedures and problems as a group, they create the moment-to-moment sharing of linguistic and cognitive resources that can lead to not only academic learning, but also respect and rapport among each other (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Alvarez, 2001). As you begin to address intergroup relations in your classroom, you might want to select one or two multicultural education resources from Example 1.1 (Chapter 1) for closer study and discussion with your colleagues at your school or in your university classes.



## **Learning a Second Language in School: Processes and Factors**

We have just reviewed the complex nature of language proficiency and some theoretical perspectives on the process of language acquisition. What does this mean for students learning English as a second language in school? In this section, we discuss essential processes and factors influencing English learners in school, particularly the social context of second language acquisition, age and the interplay of social and cognitive factors in the second language acquisition process, social

**ACTIVITY 2.2****Sharing Your Experiences Learning a New Language**

If you have studied or acquired another language, share your language learning story with the group. Using the stories, discuss the effects on second language acquisition of differences, such as age, culture, and language learning situation, and opportunities to use the new language with native speakers.

Reflecting further, what do you recall as the hardest part? Why was it hard? What was easy? Why was it easy? How proficient did you become? What affected your degree of proficiency? Can you identify a theory underlying the teaching approach (e.g., behaviorist, innatist, interactionist)?

versus academic language use, comprehensible input and social interaction, and the treatment of language learning errors in the classroom. As we discuss these factors, you will see how theory has affected our views.

### **Second Language Acquisition Contexts: Formal Study Versus Immersion in a Country Where the Language Is Spoken**

One factor that affects second language acquisition is the social context in which the second language was learned. Have you ever studied another language, or do you know someone who has? How did you learn it? And how well did you learn it? When we ask our students this question, we hear a wonderful variety of second language learning stories. Most of our students have had the experience of studying a foreign language in high school or college. They often recall specific foreign language teaching techniques for learning the grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, usually of a European language such as French, German, or Spanish. Many also remember activities such as choral repetition of sentence patterns, memorization of vocabulary items, and perhaps in-class opportunities to put these together in writing or simulated conversations.

Under these learning conditions, some basic knowledge of the language may have developed. However, few people report reaching a substantial level of communicative competence unless they spent time in a country where the language was spoken. The opportunity for foreign travel or residency often bears fruit for second language development based on the seed of classroom instruction. In contrast, students who have come to the United States as immigrants have a different language learning story to tell. Many hold vivid memories of entering elementary or high school knowing not a word of English and feeling frightened and baffled at the world around them. They struggled for months, perhaps years, to become acclimated to the new language and culture. All too often, immigrant students are overcome by these demands and drop out of school. Yet others learn English well enough to be successful in university classes, though perhaps retaining a foreign accent. Reflecting on your own language learning experiences and talking with other people about how they learned a second language can provide insights into the process of second language acquisition. What can we learn from different language learning stories?

Perhaps the first thing we can see is a distinction between studying a foreign language for one period a day in school and learning a language through immersion in a social environment, including the school, where the target language is used regularly for day-to-day communication. Differences between these two language acquisition contexts directly affect the language learning process. Students immersed in an environment in which the new language is spoken have the advantage of being surrounded with opportunities to hear and use it. The larger social environment features the new language, not only in the classroom but also everywhere else—in shopping malls, at the theater, on television, in newspapers, and more. As a result, classroom learning can be solidified and expanded to the extent that learners interact within the larger community (Dulay et al., 1982). In addition, students learning the language of their new country are likely to be motivated, because success in acquiring strong English skills is important for day-to-day functioning and full participation in society.

In a social immersion situation in which learners live in a country where the target language is spoken, second language acquisition is facilitated by the rich language exposure available and by the inherent **need to communicate**. At the same time, students are challenged to the highest levels of oral and written acquisition because they will need native-like skills to qualify for future education and employment opportunities. In contrast, foreign language study tends to be limited in opportunities and necessity to use the language for functional communication. Similarly, the expectations for accomplishment are correspondingly lower. When students enter your class knowing little English, they have the benefits of an immersion situation because the new language is used both in school and in the larger environment. At the same time, some may feel pressured by their need to learn the new language as quickly as possible.

### **Age and the Interplay of Sociocultural, Personality, and Cognitive Factors**

Another factor affecting second language development is the learner's age when second language acquisition begins. Among native-born children who speak another language at home, such as Spanish, Cantonese, or Crow, English language acquisition usually begins prior to or upon entry to elementary school. For immigrants, on the other hand, the process may begin at any age, depending on how old they are when they arrive in their new country. Age on arrival bears heavily on second language acquisition processes and eventual levels of attainment. Why is this so? The influence of age on second language acquisition stems from the complex interplay of sociocultural, cognitive, and personality factors (cf. Brown [2007] for a thorough discussion of these factors).

As we begin our discussion, let's bear in mind that learning a new language in school is a demanding task, no matter what the age when acquisition begins. The magnitude of the task is revealed by research showing that it takes *at least* five to seven years to reach a level of English language development sufficient for academic success in English (Cummins, 1979; Collier, 1987, 1987/1988; Thomas & Collier, 2002). In addition, the idea that learning a new language is easy for young children has not been borne out in research. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that adults may be *superior* to young learners in terms of literacy,

vocabulary, pragmatics, and schematic knowledge (Scovel, 1999). To illustrate how age interacts with sociocultural, personality and cognitive factors, let's look at the case of Montha, a university student who came to the United States from Cambodia at age 12.

**SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS.** Montha was the eldest of six children. She had been educated in Cambodia and was literate in Khmer when she arrived, but her education took place entirely in English after she moved to the United States. The family spoke Khmer at home but nowhere else did she use or hear her home language. Montha remembers how difficult it was to fit in at school, where she knew neither the language nor the customs of her schoolmates. She felt frightened and isolated, because there were no other Cambodians in her school. To exacerbate the situation, at age 12 she was self-conscious and concerned about being different. Nonetheless, she gradually found her way into school social groups and began to acquire English.

Reflecting back, Montha feels that her younger siblings had more chances to interact with fluent English speakers than she did. For one thing, as the eldest daughter, Montha was expected to help her mother daily with household chores, whereas her sisters were permitted to play with other children in the neighborhood. In addition, as an adolescent, she was not permitted to date or to go out with friends in cars, an accepted pastime of many U.S. teenagers. For these activities, she had to wait until she had graduated from high school and no longer lived with her parents. In these ways, we see how the age differences between Montha and her younger siblings affected social participation with English-speaking friends based on her family's cultural expectations.

From this brief example, we can see how age interacted with social and cultural factors to constrain Montha's social language learning opportunities. First of all, she entered the U.S. social scene at an age when cultural expectations of teenagers differed considerably between her home culture and that of the larger society. Remaining at home to help her mother, she was restricted from certain aspects of social participation that might have helped her learn English. In contrast, her siblings were young enough to be permitted to play with English-speaking neighborhood children, and this type of play was acceptable to Montha's parents. In other words, Montha's siblings, by virtue of their age, were permitted a broader range of age-appropriate social activity acceptable to both Cambodian and U.S. parents, and this, very likely, facilitated language acquisition.

**PERSONALITY FACTORS.** Despite these external social and cultural restraints, Montha did become proficient in English, no doubt due in part to certain personal attributes, including unflagging determination and persistence in achieving her goals. At this point in her life, she was dedicated to becoming a teacher of English learners, and was working on passing the basic skills test required to enter the teaching credential program. Another personal attribute was her particularly sensitive and empathetic attitude toward others, which certainly played a role in her desire to teach and may also have motivated her English language acquisition. Given that there were no other Cambodian families in her school or neighborhood, her social contacts required English, and Montha was a person who thrived on social relationships.

**COGNITIVE FACTORS.** Montha was a successful English learner who went on to earn a baccalaureate degree at a state university. By age 12 when she came to the United States, she had developed substantial cognitive, literacy, and academic abilities in her first language. These abilities no doubt contributed to her success in high school and college, given the fact that well-developed academic skills and strategies transfer between a bilingual's two languages (Cummins, 1981). Montha's journey was nonetheless a difficult one. Academic development in her primary language ceased on her arrival, and she had a great deal of academic English to acquire before she could qualify for the university. Once there, she struggled to earn the grades that would allow her to go on for a teaching credential. In addition, she had difficulty passing the timed reading, writing, and math examinations required for the teaching credential. Without her persistent nature and her commitment to helping children reminiscent of her former self, she would most likely not have been able to push through and become a teacher. But she did!

Montha's English developed fully, though she retained some pronunciation features that set her apart from native English speakers. She also maintained fluency in Khmer and a strong ethnic identity. As a postscript, Montha tells us that her mother never did learn English. Being an adult, her mother was not required to attend school daily as her children were. Nor did she seek work outside the home as her husband did. Thus, she did not find herself in social contexts that might have provided the exposure and motivation needed for English language acquisition. These days, Montha's mother takes a great deal of pride in Montha's accomplishments as a bilingual teacher and serves as a valuable resource when Montha needs a forgotten phrase in Khmer or some detail of a cultural tradition to include in her curriculum at school. Montha's case highlights how her age on arrival interacted with sociocultural, cognitive, and personality factors in her language acquisition process and in her journey to becoming a bilingual teacher.

**DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOL EXPECTATIONS OF YOUNGER AND OLDER LEARNERS.**

Another age-related factor affecting second language acquisition is the level of cognitive-academic functioning normally expected across the grades from elementary through high school. A general task for all English language learners is to gain enough English proficiency to carry out school tasks about as well as their English fluent peers. For kindergarten and first-grade children, the linguistic performance gap between English language learners and their English-speaking age mates is relatively small. After all, monolingual children are still developing both language and concepts during the primary grades. Furthermore, learning for all young children is best derived from direct experience, manipulation of concrete objects, and social interaction with adults and peers. As kindergarten teachers know, younger children learn more by talking while doing than by listening to a long verbal explanation from the teacher. The same holds true for young English language learners. Thus, learning environments that are age appropriate for younger monolingual children tend to be optimal for young English language learners as well. Nevertheless, special accommodations are needed to help young English learners adjust to a school, understand instruction, learn English, and succeed socially and academically.

For older immigrant students, academic learning presents greater demands on second language proficiency than for younger newcomers (Ovando et al.,

Students who begin learning English in secondary school face substantial linguistic and academic challenges.



2003). They have further to go and less time to catch up than their younger brothers and sisters, as we saw in Montha's case. From middle school on, and sometimes earlier, we expect students to be able to learn from lecture-style verbal instruction at least some of the time. Furthermore, subject matter grows increasingly complex and abstract. Thus, students who are older on arrival have a larger language gap to fill before they will be able to function academically in English at a level commensurate with their English fluent peers. On the other hand, precisely because they are older, they bring the advantages of a well-developed cognitive and conceptual system. Moreover, they may have had sufficient schooling in their home country to be facile in literacy and numeracy skills. If so, they stand a good chance of academic success, provided that their new school offers systematic support for both second language development, social-cultural adjustment, and continued content area learning. Other students may have had little schooling, or their educational opportunities may have been interrupted by war, political turmoil, or the struggles involved in leaving their home country. In such cases, students will need extra support as they grapple with academic literacy, content area learning, and social-cultural adjustment in their new country.

### **Teacher Expectations for English Learner Achievement**

Neither we as teachers nor our students have any control over their age on arrival. Yet when students enter school with little or no knowledge of English, they are faced with the dual challenge of learning a new language and trying to fit into school routines both socially and academically—no small task! What do we know about second language acquisition processes that can facilitate these

adjustments? First, we have seen that the process of acquiring a second language is facilitated when learners and speakers of the target language have the opportunity and desire to communicate with each other. Thus students need opportunities to interact with fellow students and negotiate meaning by sharing experiences through activities, such as group work, drama, readers' theater, art, and writing. Making use of natural cognitive and linguistic processes similar to those involved in acquiring their first language, English language learners take the language they hear spoken around them and use it gradually to acquire the new language—its vocabulary, sound system, grammatical structure, and social conventions of use.

In the earliest stages of second language acquisition, students grapple with understanding their teacher and peers and with somehow making themselves understood. As they begin to talk, learners grow in the ability to use their new language with fluency and ease, though as yet imperfectly. Eventually, as opportunities for higher-level thinking and problem solving are provided, students acquire the formal language competence necessary for more advanced instruction in mathematics, science, social studies, literature, and other subjects. Thus students must learn to engage in complex social and cognitive transactions through their second language, both orally and in reading and writing.

When we say that students must become capable of complex social and cognitive transactions through their second language, we are putting forward the goal of full English language and literacy development. That is, we are expecting them to attain the same level of English language proficiency as their native English-speaking counterparts. For English language learners, this means acquiring the essentials of English phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics and being able to integrate them for use in a wide variety of social contexts. Ultimately, we want our students to be at ease in English with their peers, potential employers, insurance agents, bank representatives, university recruiters, and the full range of social contacts that occur in daily life. Moreover, we want them to be capable of using both oral and written language in formal ways for academic purposes. This latter goal is one of the main charges of schooling for all students and represents access to the employment and social mobility available in U.S. society. If, in addition to English language skills, students have been able to develop their primary language, they will enjoy further options afforded by their bilingualism. In other words, teachers' expectations of English learners must be high, and social and academic support must be provided for these goals to be achieved.

### **Language Used for Social Interaction Versus Language Used for Academic Learning**

Some experts make a distinction between language used for basic social interaction and language used for academic purposes (Cummins, 1980). **Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)** are language skills needed for social conversation purposes, whereas **Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)** refers to formal language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, used for academic learning. Research shows that students may demonstrate basic social competence in a second language within six months to two years after arrival in a new country. In other words, they can speak English well enough to interact with their peers, talk on the telephone, and negotiate meanings with adults. However, the ability to demonstrate academic competence in the new language orally and in writing at a level commensurate with that of their native-speaking peers may take

five years or more (Cummins, 1979; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Current preliminary research findings suggest that students with no prior schooling and no primary language support may take much longer, as much as seven to ten years, to acquire academic skills in their new language (Thomas & Collier, 2002). In other words, newcomers may need substantial time and educational support to develop English skills such as those needed to understand academic lectures, to make and defend logical arguments orally or in writing, to read school texts efficiently, and to write effectively for academic purposes.

Let's take a moment to consider some aspects of academic language use that students must control with increasing sophistication as they progress from elementary through middle school and high school. Reading and writing are two obvious aspects of academic language use, particularly reading and writing essays that compare and contrast, persuade, describe, and summarize content area material. However, academic learning involves a variety of cognitively demanding oral language uses as well. For example, students need to be able to follow their teachers' or peers' oral explanations of complex concepts and procedures in science, mathematics, and the social sciences. They need to understand such explanations well enough to apply them in carrying out their own experiments, in solving mathematical problems, and in debating issues and explaining their views of topics in social science and history. Academic language use, whether oral or written, requires a growing reservoir of background knowledge pertinent to any given discipline, along with knowledge of the conventions of how to organize information orally and in writing. If we assume that the basis for these academic skills is ideally established among monolingual students by fifth or sixth grade, it is not surprising that acquiring such skills takes English learners five to seven years, or longer. We provide strategies to promote oral and written academic language development in Chapters 3 through 10.

Information on how long it takes for students to acquire English sufficient for academic purposes is important to us for two reasons. First, it reminds us that, even though students may appear fairly proficient in English during basic social interactions, they are still likely to need special support to be able to learn and display their knowledge of complex academic material through their second language. Second, it gives us a direct index of the long-term nature of the language acquisition process. We usually have students in class for just one year, and it is helpful to know that we are unlikely to witness full-blown language development in our students during that short time.

Although we may not control the timetable of language development, there are numerous strategies we, as teachers, can use to promote that development. Thus, throughout this book, we will point out ways to assist English learners to develop the kind of linguistic competence that will facilitate their academic success.

### **Learning to Use English in Socially and Culturally Appropriate Ways**

Academic language use is a major goal for all students. Equally important for students new to English is explicit instruction in socially and culturally appropriate ways of using English, oral and written. Early childhood teachers are quite accustomed to this type of socialization because it is a natural part of the curriculum. Reminding children to say “please” and “thank you,” asking for a toy instead of



grabbing it, waiting a turn instead of interrupting: All of these are second nature for teachers of young children. And all of them reflect social and cultural conventions of English in this society. Similarly, teachers help students learn the special classroom rules for taking turns, talking, listening, and responding to other points of view. Writing party invitations and “grace notes” to show gratitude or sympathy are other examples of language bound by social and cultural guidelines that are taught in school. The elementary curriculum provides many opportunities to help students learn socially and culturally appropriate language use.

If you teach English learners who arrived in this country in middle or high school, the social and cultural conventions of both oral and written language use continue to be of utmost importance. Older students typically have extensive social and cultural repertoires for primary language use. They may also know various conventions for English, but they need to add new ones as they become increasingly proficient. Explicit instruction with role-playing is often helpful as students learn both the phraseology and social protocol appropriate to everyday situations, such as using the telephone, eating at a restaurant, applying for a job, meeting new friends at a party, going to the doctor or dentist, and asking the teacher for help after school (cf. Jones, 2003). Making small talk is another aspect of communicative competence that can be quite difficult and thus merits explicit instruction. Appropriate phrases and ways of expressing emotions such as gratitude, impatience, empathy, enthusiasm, and even anger are all needed as students develop full communicative competence in English. We recommend that you use the teachers of English to speakers of other language (TESOL) standards (TESOL, 2006) to help you build social and cultural language competence into your preK-12 curriculum.

### **Comprehensible Input and Social Interaction**

As noted earlier, comprehensible input refers to language used in ways that make it understandable to the learner even though second language proficiency is limited (Krashen, 1982). Paraphrasing, repetition of key points, reference to concrete materials, and acting out meanings are some of the ways speakers can help convey meaning and thus make language more understandable. When we pair two communication channels, the verbal and the nonverbal, words and meanings become discernible to the learner, as for example, when a picture of the digestive system is displayed and pointed to during an explanation of the digestive process. In this way, language is not only understood but also forms the raw material from which learners may gradually construct the new language system for themselves. During the earliest stages of language learning, face-to-face social interactions between learners and speakers of the target language provide optimal language learning opportunities.

Language learning opportunities are richly present during social interactions because participants are likely to be focused on communicating with each other, and they will naturally make use of all their resources to do so—facial expression, dramatization, repetition, and so forth (Wong Fillmore, 1982, 1985). Furthermore, the non-English speaker can communicate at a rudimentary level through actions, nods, and facial expressions. As communication is worked out or negotiated, a great deal of understandable language is generated, thereby providing comprehensible input from which language may be acquired. Take for example an interaction we observed between two boys, Marcelino, new to English, and Joshua, a native English speaker. They were coloring a drawing they had created

of a helicopter. When finished, it was to be posted on the bulletin board with drawings of other transportation vehicles.

- JOSHUA: Here, Marcelino. Here's the green [*hands Marcelino the green crayon*].
- MARCELINO: [*Marcelino takes the green crayon and colors the helicopter.*]
- JOSHUA: Hey, wait a minute! You gotta put some red stars right here. OK?
- MARCELINO: Huh?
- JOSHUA: Red stars. I'm gonna make some red stars . . . right here. [*Joshua draws four red stars, while Marcelino continues coloring with the green crayon.*]
- MARCELINO: OK.

In this interaction, the hands-on, context-embedded activity conveyed much of the meaning. Marcelino understood the purpose of the task and was able to interact with Joshua with minimal English to negotiate division of labor. With much of the meaning conveyed by the situation and the concrete materials, Joshua's language provided comprehensible input. Thus, Marcelino is apt to retain for future use words such as *green* and *red*, and phrases such as "Wait a minute." Working one-on-one with a partner also permitted Marcelino to convey his need for Joshua to clarify his concern over the red stars. While focused on the task of coloring the helicopter, Marcelino participated in the conversation with his minimal but functional vocabulary. At the same time, he was afforded quality English input from Joshua through conversation pertaining to the hands-on activity. Interactions such as this provide important elements for language acquisition—a functional communication situation, comprehensible input, and social interaction around a purposeful task.

As the teacher, the language you use can be a valuable source of comprehensible input, whether you are working with the whole class, small groups, or individuals. In Chapter 3, we show how you can tailor your talk and your lessons to make them optimally understandable to students, thereby enhancing content learning and second language acquisition. This kind of instruction is often referred to as sheltered instruction or Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE). Finally, it is important to note that written language also affords comprehensible input when students read, provided the material is relatively easy to understand (Krashen, 1993), a topic addressed in Chapter 8.

### **What about Language Learning Errors?**

As we have seen, the question of learner errors in language acquisition is a topic of great interest and controversy. How should we treat second language errors in the classroom? Should we correct students' errors or not? If we do correct, when and how do we do so? We will give you our ideas on this complex issue, but you will need to decide for yourself how you will proceed on a case-by-case basis.

There are several considerations to think about in deciding whether to correct learner errors. Your first consideration is the English language development stage of the learner. Many errors are developmental and will eventually be replaced by conventional forms without your intervention. You will recall that certain morphemes develop early, such as the *-ing* form of the verb and the plural *-s*/. Other morphemes develop late, such as the *-s*/ for the third-person plural. The latter error continues to appear in some English learners' speech many years



Working in groups while using English promotes academic learning, social development, and second language acquisition.

after they begin to learn English. For students in the early stages of second language acquisition, errors that impede communication may be corrected in a sensitive and natural way, especially those involving vocabulary. Consider the following example from a third-grade English language development classroom in which five English learners are playing a board game with the teacher standing nearby. Natalia, a native Russian speaker, has been in this country four months and is a beginner in English.

NATALIA: I putting the marker on the points.

TEACHER: Those are called dots. You're putting the marker on the dots.

NATALIA: The dots.

The teacher focused on the vocabulary item *dots*, and her gentle yet explicit correction was well received. However, the teacher did not correct Natalia's use of *I* instead of *I am* or *I'm*. Why? First, lack of the verb or its contraction does not make a difference in meaning. Second, this is a common beginner error, and appropriate verb use is likely to develop with time. Third, it is doubtful that correction of this grammatical form would result in Natalia's being able to produce it in another context. Corrections that focus on meaning tend to be easier to learn than those that focus on grammar alone. As a rule of thumb, you may provide words and word forms to beginning English learners to help them make themselves understood, thereby maintaining a communication focus.

As second language acquisition proceeds, there may be some grammatical errors that persist and become permanent or *fossilized* (Selinker, 1972). We have seen, for example, that the third person singular, present tense verb marker *-s* develops late, and sometimes not at all. A possible explanation for its tardy

appearance may be that the “person” and “tense” information conveyed by the -s can be understood through context. Because English requires that the subject be explicitly stated, subject–verb agreement is redundant, and the tense can be inferred from context, as illustrated by the following sentence pairs. Notice that the grammatical errors do not impede communication.

Rena <b>e</b> bakes cookies for me.	Rena <b>e</b> ba <b>k</b> e cookies for me.
The cat sits in the sun.	The cat sit in the sun.

What should you do if such grammatical errors persist among intermediate and advanced students? Our view is that grammatical errors are best dealt with in the context of student writing. For one thing, writing can be looked at and analyzed in a leisurely way, whereas speech goes by quickly and unconsciously and then disappears. A student may not be able to perceive that a spoken error occurred unless it was tape recorded. Even then, the student may not hear the error. On the other hand, a written error is visible and preserved. It can be pointed to and discussed. When patterns of error recur in a student’s writing, specific mini-lessons can be tailored for the student so that he or she may self-edit. Details of this process are discussed in Chapter 6 on editing during process writing.

In summary, the way you treat English learner errors will depend on your own judgment, taking into consideration the student’s English language developmental level, the prevalence of the error type, the importance of the error type for communication, and your specific goals for the student in terms of English language development. There is not sufficient research on the specifics of English language development to give you error correction recipes. Even if there were, individual differences would obviate their usefulness. Finally, you should keep in mind that error correction is not the major source of English language development; meaningful experiences, using the language for a variety of oral and written purposes, play a much larger role. Nonetheless, grammatical refinements in speech and writing may require explicit instruction. Thus the error correction guidelines and examples we provide are suggestive, not prescriptive. Your own trial and error will provide you with further information, as you work with English learners to promote their school success.

## Summary

In this chapter, we discussed second language acquisition as children experience it in school. First, we defined language proficiency, pointing out grammatical and social aspects of both communicative competence and communicative performance. Next we summarized behaviorist, innatist, and social interactionist theories of first and second language acquisition. We then examined a variety of factors that researchers and theorists have noted as important in second language acquisition: the language learning environment (immersion versus foreign language), age, cognitive development, the cultures of the home and school, and ways in which all of these interact to motivate and give purpose to second

language acquisition. Finally, we discussed comprehensible input, social interaction, learner errors, and differences between social and academic language development.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (4th Ed.). White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman. This is a classic text that should be in every second language teacher's library. Chapters include: Language, Learning, and Teaching; First Language Acquisition; Age and Acquisition; Human Learning; Styles and Strategies; Sociocultural Factors; Communicative Competence; and Theories of Second Language Acquisition.

Ellis, R. (1997). *Second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This book, one in the Oxford Introductions to Language Study series, is 147 pages long. Short chapters include topics such as describing and explaining L2 acquisition, the nature of the language learner, interlanguage, social aspects of interlanguage, individual differences in L2 acquisition, and instruction in L2 acquisition. This excellent, short book also contains a glossary and annotated bibliography.

Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. (2007). *An introduction to language* (8th ed.). Boston: Thomson Heinle.

This classic text, in its eighth edition, is an excellent introduction to language study. Clearly written chapters include topics such as: brain and language, morphology, sentence patterns, language in society, language change, and writing.

Hall, J. K. & Eggington, W. E. (Eds.). (2000). *The sociopolitics of English language teaching*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

This edited volume brings together under one cover an array of important topics, offering research-based perspectives on the political, social, and cultural dimensions of English language teaching. Topics include policy and ideology in the spread of English, linguistic human rights, official English and bilingual education, and non-native varieties of English. Contributors also offer ideas

for transforming language education practices and for becoming sociopolitically active.

Hinkel, E. (Ed.). (2005). *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

This comprehensive handbook offers 57 chapters by experts in the many, various topic areas within the field of second language teaching and learning. The chapters are divided into 8 sections, all of which refer to the main topic of second language teaching and learning: (1) social contexts in research; (2) research methods; (3) applied linguistics and second language research; (4) second language processes and development; (5) methods and curricula in second language teaching; (6) second language testing and assessment; (7) identity, culture and critical pedagogy; (8) language planning and policy and language rights. This handbook provides an important, up-to-date resource for teachers, university students, and researchers.

Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (2006). *How languages are learned* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This excellent, friendly text, completely revised and updated, relates complex issues in a clear and concise manner. Chapter topics include learning a first language, theories of second language learning, factors affecting second language learning, learner language, second language learning in the classroom, and popular ideas about language learning. Using a scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," the text begins with 12 provocative questions regarding language learning; the questions provide an excellent advance organizer for a course and for this book. A chapter reviewing classroom research is particularly excellent because it analyzes research based on language acquisition theories such as behaviorism and interactionism. This is a short book, 135 pages, that presents valuable information in an accessible manner.

Mitchell, R. & Myles, F. (2002). *Second language learning theories*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

This short book, just over 200 pages, is an excellent introduction to second language learning theories. Chapters include second language learning, key concepts and issues, recent history of second language learning research, cognitive approaches to second language learning, functional/pragmatic perspectives on second language learning, and sociocultural perspectives on second language learning.

Parker, F. & Riley, K. (2000). *Linguistics for non-linguists: A primer with exercises* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

This is the perfect book for teachers who are new the field of linguistics but would like to build their understanding of language. Chapter topics include pragmatics, semantics, morphology, language variation, first-language acquisition, second-language acquisition, writing, and language processing. Each chapter contains supplementary exercises which help readers use and consolidate their linguistics knowledge.



## Activities

1. After reading this chapter, which language acquisition theory do you favor? Or do you favor a combination of the different views? Do you think any one theory seems to account for all the variables in language acquisition? Discuss these issues with someone else who has read the chapter.
2. Taking each of the language acquisition theories in turn—that is, behaviorist, innatist, and interactionist—think of how each view might help you organize your classroom for maximum language learning. Compare and contrast each of the views in terms of a classroom context. For example, look at Table 2.2, which delineates the different theories, and determine what a classroom that strictly followed one theory might be like: Would desks be in rows or circles? Would the teacher always be in the front of the class or moving around the class most of the time? Would students have many choices of classroom activities or would the teacher determine almost all lessons? Finally, describe what theory or combination of theories accounts for the kind of classroom you think is ideal for second language learners with varying degrees of English language proficiency.
3. Think of your own experiences learning or using a language. What were the contexts in which you were most successful in learning a language? Did you learn best in a classroom context, or, if you have visited a country where you had to learn at least some basics of a second language, how did you go about doing it? What helped? What didn't help? If you were to need to learn a language for something important like getting a job, how would you go about it?
4. If you are currently learning a language, you might try keeping a journal of your language learning and language acquisition experiences. For example, how do you feel as a language learner under different kinds of circumstances? How do you react, positively or negatively, to circumstances in which you aren't fully proficient in the language? What humorous situations have you experienced as a result of learning a new language?



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## **Video Homework Exercise**

### ***Culture and Self-Esteem***

Go to MyEducationLab, select the topic “Diversity,” and watch the video entitled “Culture and Self-Esteem.”

The teachers in this video discuss the connection between cultural diversity and self-esteem, including: the importance of supporting

the culture and strengths that students bring to the classroom; how teaching is not just the delivery of information to students by a teacher, but rather the establishment of a connection among students and teachers in that each shares what they know and each learns; and the importance of fostering success in tasks every day because self-efficacy is a major contributor to self-esteem and development.

Complete the homework questions that accompany it. You may print your work or have it transmitted to your professor as necessary.