

Position Statement

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One of the most important roles for teachers of English as a Second/Foreign Language is to facilitate the ultimate success of the learners in their classroom. As instructors seek to pave the way for their students' success, the following questions will inevitably present themselves: *What makes a second language learner succeed or fail? Can this success or failure be predicted by the presence or absence of certain variables? Are some learning variables more important than others in predicting success?* As second language teachers and researchers in the field of SLA have attempted to answer these fundamental questions, they have arrived at a broad array of conclusions, some complementary, some in direct opposition to one another.

In the following pages, I will present my personal position on the ways in which certain variables contribute to learners' success in their second language learning journey, based on current research and my own teaching experience. I will recommend ways that teachers can adapt their teaching approaches to create the best possible conditions for students' optimal success. Finally, I will reflect on the changes that have taken place in my perspective over the course of my studies.

### **Understanding the Nature of Second Language Learning**

Before considering the individual factors that influence learning, it is important to examine the nature of second language proficiency *in general* in order to discover what aspects impact all learners.

### **Theology of Language**

From a Christian point of view, language originates with God and as such, is not an accidental phenomenon borne out of necessity. Rather, it is a beautiful creation, reflecting God's perfect design as well as his very nature as a God who speaks (using his word to speak the world

into being in the Genesis account, and speaking to people—his creation—throughout history). A view of language as revealing part of God’s nature should inspire a reverent handling of language in the classroom. For Christ-followers, all speech needs to bring honor to God; as Ephesians 4:29 instructs, ‘let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear’ (ESV). Through their teaching and example, Christian instructors should show learners “how to wield the language in a manner that brings life” (Robison 2011).

### **First vs. Second Language Competence**

Whereas all children successfully acquire a first language (provided they do not have a developmental disability and have not been exposed to extreme trauma), not all adults will successfully acquire a second language (L2). According to Chomsky’s innateness theory, children benefit from a pre-programed internal set of assumptions about language (Universal Grammar) which helps them acquire their first language (L1). Adults learning an L2 have more developed cognitive processes than do children (such as metalinguistic awareness), but they may also experience negative transfer (interference from the L1) and a host of detrimental affective factors such as higher levels of inhibition.

Although there are some similarities between the processes of first and second language acquisition (the morpheme order of acquisition and overgeneralization/oversimplification, for example), comparing the two is not always beneficial. Approaches that base L2 learning on the way a child learns language are missing key differences between adult and child cognition, and it is most helpful to observe the process of adult second language acquisition on its own terms.

## The Second Language Learning Process

Linguists have explained the process of second language acquisition from a wide range of viewpoints through the decades, and there remain a variety of perspectives on how L2 learning takes place. **Behavioral** perspectives point to the importance of positive and negative reinforcement and habit formation. An example of this type of approach would be the audiolingual method with its emphasis on imitation and repetition.

In contrast to the behaviorist view, the **innatist** perspective—in which Chomsky was a key figure—emphasizes the inborn framework for language and downplays the role of practice. Krashen, with his Monitor Model (1982) and comprehensible input hypothesis was an important player in this perspective. Krashen holds that the only thing needed for successful L2 acquisition was comprehensible input ( $i + 1$ ), where input is provided at the level just beyond the learner's present level (based on the internal order of language acquisition believed to be predictable for all learners).

A third viewpoint, the **cognitive** perspective, focuses on mental processing and examines the importance of aspects of learning such as transfer-appropriate processing (Lightbown, 2008), the idea that knowledge can best be retrieved in a context similar to the one in which it was acquired (e.g. in written or spoken form). Swain's (1985) output hypothesis also follows a cognitive perspective, presenting a complementary viewpoint to that of Krashen's input hypothesis. In Swain's hypothesis, the act of producing language helps the user acquire language they were not fully conscious of when they had only received it as input. Finally, the **sociocultural** perspective emphasizes the social and interactive nature of language learning and has greatly influenced the current trends of communicative approaches to second language teaching.

Although these differing viewpoints may seem on the surface to be incompatible, each one yields useful elements that can, in fact, be complementary when incorporated into a thoughtful approach. While my personal position has always emphasized the sociocultural perspective of second language acquisition, I have gained many insights from the cognitive perspective which can add depth to the communicative approach in areas where the latter is weak. I find Swain's (1985) output hypothesis to be consistent with my experience as a language teacher and learner, in that producing language is a crucial component to learning, in addition to receiving comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). Pienemann's (1988) concept of developmental features also resonates with me, suggesting that instruction that follows the natural progression of developmental language features will be most productive and successful. In summary, I believe that the best approach is one that presents structures in an order consistent with the way language is learned and helps learners to both receive and produce comprehensible input in an interactive classroom environment.

### **Communicative Competence**

In order to answer the question of how successful an individual has been in learning the L2, there are several aspects that must be considered. These aspects of language proficiency, or communicative competence, are divided into the categories of grammatical, discourse, functional, sociolinguistic and strategic.

**Grammatical competence** focuses on the accuracy of the learner's language; in other words, is their word choice, pronunciation, syntax, and writing *correct*? **Discourse competence** is concerned with the logical and cohesive flow of speech or writing. Different types of discourse have different rules for how language should be organized; for example, a research paper sounds very different from an informal spoken conversation, but regardless of the type, the language

used needs to *make sense* in the way topics are introduced and relate to one another. **Functional competence** focuses on whether or not the speaker's purpose was accomplished. If the speaker meant to ask for help, did the listener understand what was intended, and provide the help solicited? **Sociolinguistic competence** measures whether the learner can produce socially and culturally appropriate utterances, avoid taboo topics and requests, and adjust level of formality as the situation requires. Lastly, **strategic competence** allows L2 users to negotiate for meaning and repair communication breakdowns, ensuring the effectiveness of the interaction.

Learners tend to be stronger in some areas of communicative competence and weaker in others, and it is difficult—if not impossible—to say that certain areas are more important than others. If a learner is weak in one area (say, grammatical competence, for example), they may make up for this deficiency with a strength in another area (strategic competence, perhaps). However, when looking at an individual's overall language competence, a weakness in one area can diminish strengths in others. An L2 user therefore cannot be considered entirely successful without a certain degree of proficiency in all five areas of communicative competence.

### **The Second Language Learner as an Individual**

What are the primary factors that vary from learner to learner and which of these factors are most indicative of their potential to succeed in their L2 learning endeavor? The field of SLA generally separates these individual factors into the subcategories of linguistic, affective and cognitive variables. As a Christian, it also seems relevant to consider the spiritual nature of the individual and the connection of language and spirituality.

#### **Linguistic Factors**

The adult second language learner can experience a very different process of acquisition, depending on their first language. The study of contrastive analysis (developed in the 1950s) sought to identify areas of interference between the L1 and L2 and predict where errors would occur. It was thought that transfer from the L1 was the main hurdle that needed to be overcome to successfully acquire the L2.

The study of error analysis (1960s) followed on its heels, and focused on learning from errors, rather than trying to avoid them. **Transfer errors** happen when learners perceive that something in the L2 is similar to their L1 and may include underextension (applying a rule too conservatively), and avoidance (consciously avoiding something that does not exist in the L1, or simply not noticing it). Intra-lingual transfer occurs within the L2, when a learner uses overgeneralization to extend a rule to irregular forms, for example. **Communication strategies** seek to compensate for lack of knowledge or understanding and include *circumlocution* (attempting to explain an unknown word using known vocabulary), *borrowing* from the L1 by guessing cognates, and *relaxification* (translating word by word), among others.

Interlanguage analysis, unlike contrastive analysis or error analysis, seeks to treat interlanguage (the way the learner currently uses their L2) as a language in its own right, and studies how learners use language throughout the acquisition process. Specific areas of interlanguage analysis include morpheme studies (-ing is learned before -ed, etc.) and developmental sequences (order of acquisition of certain grammatical word orders).

## Affective Factors

Affective factors are perhaps some of the strongest indicators of success or failure in language learning. These are aspects that touch the very core of learners' being, and influence how they feel about the language, the language learning process, and themselves as a language learner.

**Motivation** is the broadest and most complex aspect of affect and is probably what first springs to mind when teachers consider what makes a "good" language learner. **Intrinsically motivated learners are thought to have the advantage over extrinsically motivated students who are simply learning because the expectation is being imposed on them. Integrative motivation is when a learner wants to learn a language in order to participate in that language community, whereas instrumental motivation serves the learner as a 'means to an end,' perhaps to accomplish an academic or career goal. Although integrative motivation was once thought to be a loftier goal, and therefore more indicative of success, an instrumental goal can serve as an equally strong motivator.**

**Other personality traits within the affective realm that vary from person to person are inhibition, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking tendency, self-esteem and ego permeability. The term **ego permeability** is used to express the level of adaptability of a learner's core identity. Since the identity of adults is usually closely tied to the language group to which they belong, they are said to have a less 'permeable' language ego than children, meaning it is more difficult for them to switch and identify with a different language group.**

**If instructors were able to choose the personality traits for an ideal language learner, most would select a risk-taker with a high tolerance of ambiguity, strong self-esteem and low inhibition. Although these characteristics can all be helpful in learning a language, any**



deficiencies in these areas can be compensated for with a good dose of determination and hard work!

### **Cognitive Factors**

Most teachers are familiar with learning styles (visual, verbal, auditory, and kinesthetic), but may be less familiar with cognitive processing strategies. The way learners cognitively process information will profoundly impact their ease or difficulty of learning in a given context so it is important for any approach to take these factors into consideration to ensure all learners' needs are being met.

The following cognitive processing styles represent opposite ends of a continuum, and students will usually lean toward one end or the other, although they may use different strategies depending on the task at hand. **Field dependence** is associated with empathy and interpersonal skills, while **field independence** refers to more analytical processing that is focused on the task (rather than the relationships) at hand. **Analytic** types will break down a task into parts; **holistic** types will look at a task from a broad perspective. **Serial** learners prefer to organize a task sequentially, while **random** learners are more spontaneous. **Reflective** individuals learn inductively, often at a slower pace, whereas **impulsive** types thrive on taking risk and plunging ahead enthusiastically, with less focus on accuracy. Finally, a **passive** cognitive processing style will lead learners to follow the teacher's lead and enjoy the structure of the classroom. By contrast, an **active** style gives learners the desire to "blaze their own trail" and take charge of their own learning.

Although certain cognitive characteristics might make it easier for students to learn an L2 in certain contexts (e.g., a passive style naturally lends itself to a classroom with strong teacher

direction, while an active learner might feel somewhat stifled), these traits alone do not predispose a learner to success or failure. Provided a learner can access instruction that complements his or her cognitive processing strategies, successful L2 acquisition is attainable. Even given an unfavorable context, a highly motivated learner can overcome this obstacle by supplementing the instruction they receive in the classroom with their own self-guided learning.

### **Spiritual Aspect of Learning**

An aspect of second language acquisition that is often neglected is that of the spiritual nature of language learners. From a Christian worldview (as well as many other theistic perspectives) students are spiritual beings capable of spiritual growth in addition to cognitive and affective development. Any type of learning—language learning included—can touch the spiritual as well as physical world. Since language must be able to describe everything that we want to communicate, students will need to gain the competence to talk about spiritual topics in the L2 in order to discuss things that are important to them personally or to others with whom they interact. As a result of courses in this program of study (including the present class), I have been growing in my understanding of the place of faith and spirituality in the language classroom. Given the importance of spirituality in the lives of many students, it is worth considering how learners' faith and spiritual beliefs can be included in their language learning experience rather than being abandoned at the classroom door.

### **Contextual Variables**

The context in which a student learns a second language also plays an important role in how quickly and well the language is learned. Is learning taking place in a country where the learner's L2 is the dominant language? Is she learning in a classroom, "on the street" through daily interaction, or both? If enrolled in classes, how many hours of instruction are provided? What are the methods and approach used? How much opportunity is available to practice outside the classroom? These answers to these questions will contribute greatly to the learner's degree of ultimate success.

Here in the United States in the adult ESL programs I am most familiar with, students generally have limited exposure to and interaction with the target language. Classes provide limited time to practice English (usually 2-6 hours per week) and since the classes are elective and involve a minimal financial investment, students' attendance tends to be sporadic. The reality for many adult learners is that while some may use English at their job, there is often a group of coworkers who speak their L1, limiting opportunities to practice the L2 even at work. Translators are often available at clinics and schools, and most immigrants belong to a tight-knit family group and social circle in which their L1, not English, is usually the language of choice. While many are motivated to learn English, there is very little time or mental energy left to spend on learning after home, family and work duties are completed.

Before taking this course, I failed to appreciate the importance of context in the L2 learning process, and tended to leave it out of the equation in favor of other factors such as individual motivation. I now see how crucial context is in a learner's success: without sufficient opportunity to use the language in "real life" settings, it is difficult to gain the broad range of experiences necessary for mastery of the L2.

### **Adapting Instruction to Individual and Contextual Variables**

Although some of the abovementioned factors are beyond teachers' control, there are also many ways that instructors can contribute to their student's L2 learning success by adapting their classroom approach. A few specific ideas are listed below:

### **Cognitive Processing Styles**

Considering the differing ways students are cognitively oriented can help teachers to include different types of activities that will benefit each learner in their classroom. For example, field independent learners may appreciate more analytical activities such as tests, worksheets, or puzzles, while field dependent learners might gravitate toward collaborative activities such as partner work, conversational activities, and group projects. Explicit form-focused instruction may appeal to analytic individuals, while an implicit whole-language approach will benefit holistic learners. Activities with clear, step-by-step instructions are best for serial learners, but random learners will benefit from making their own unplanned discoveries from large chunks of language input (perhaps videos or listening activities with open-ended follow up questions). Teacher-guided activities with clear objectives will appeal to passive learners, while active learners may require more autonomy to craft their own learning experiences such as research projects, class presentations, etc. It is wise for teachers to focus specifically on cognitive processing styles that differ from their own, since it is likely that they will unconsciously gravitate toward activities that relate to their own personal cognitive styles.

### **Developmental Features**

Pienemann (1988) suggests that students cannot successfully learn language structures before they are developmentally ready, and it is therefore counterproductive to try to teach these forms prematurely. Lightbown and Spada (2013) present this as the "Teach what is Teachable"

approach, and it is based on the idea that there is a natural progression of developmental features which needs to be followed in L2 instruction.

The concept of developmental features was introduced to me during this course and is something I plan to learn more about through further reading. I have encountered some barriers in my previous teaching experience (e.g., when teaching the formation and word order of different types of questions in English) which suggest that following these developmental stages could be helpful for learners. By familiarizing themselves with these stages for developmental features, teachers may be able to avoid unnecessary frustration for students (and themselves) caused by introducing concepts before learners are ready to acquire them.

### **Motivation**

Instead of having the attitude that motivation is something that students “either have or they don’t,” teachers can utilize Dörnyei's (2009) concept of a motivational self system to help learners picture their future selves as competent L2 users. Teachers can guide students through the process of setting specific, achievable long- and short-term goals for their language learning, correlating with the step of “developing an action plan” (p. 37). Learners can envision where they want to be in terms of language proficiency in one year, and the instructor should help them chart the steps needed to attain their goal (number of hours studying per week, regular meetings with a “conversation partner” for English practice, or other goal-specific objectives).

The teacher might also consider inviting a guest speaker to class who has successfully learned English as an adult. The guest can describe his/her language learning experiences, including specific strategies used. The class should prepare questions to ask the guest speaker. This exercise could be useful in “creating the vision” of the learners’ ideal self, since “presenting

powerful role models” is one method Dörnyei suggest to help learners envision their future self (p. 33).

### **Corrective Feedback**

The choices teachers make about how to provide feedback on learner errors is another important way to influence successful language acquisition. Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that recasts seem to be both teachers’ most commonly used method of providing corrective feedback, as well as the least effective. Loewen & Philp (2006) found that recasts were successful if the correction was stressed, but that the uptake did not necessarily improve students’ future performance, and Sheen (2010) pointed to the most important factor affecting the success of feedback being the explicitness of the feedback. Perhaps the most enlightening guidance for teachers regarding corrective feedback is the counterbalance hypothesis, proposed by Lyster and Mori (2006). This is the idea that students will best notice corrective feedback if it is presented in a way that contrasts with the focus of the class or activity (form vs. meaning). For example, learners may not notice an oral recast if the class has a communicative orientation because they may assume the teacher is simply expressing understanding, whereas explicit metalinguistic feedback may catch their attention because of its contrast to meaning-focused interaction.

These studies can help teachers think critically about how and when to use different types of corrective feedback to their greatest advantage. By using a variety of different types of feedback in response to learner errors, teachers can improve the chances of noticing and uptake. It seems advisable for instructors to become conscious of when they are using recasts especially, since this seems to be the type of feedback that comes naturally to many, and may be used automatically without considering whether it will actually be noticed. Interspersing recasts with other more explicit forms of feedback, especially those that lead the learner to reformulate the

utterance and produce it correctly (such as clarification requests and elicitation) may have a more effective result.

### **Spiritual Themes in the Language Classroom**

In light of the spiritual nature of learners, teachers in the L2 classroom may want to consider how to weave spiritual themes such as forgiveness, suffering, death, faith beliefs, prayer, etc. into class discussions. Smith (2009) suggests using real life, personal stories to provide a means for students to consider spiritual themes within the language classroom. By drawing from real life stories (rather than relying on the often-artificial world of textbook characters), we can engage students' interest and demonstrate how spiritual or moral choices played out in the life of a real historical character.

Other ways of accomplishing this goal could include asking students to write or talk about the personal meaning of certain holidays (like Christmas or Easter), or asking them to explain the significance of an important religious holiday in their country. Students could also be asked to discuss the role of faith and spirituality in their own family or culture.

Although this is a counter-cultural approach in many contexts, it is a worthy endeavor for Christian teachers of English (as well as those from other faith backgrounds) to thoughtfully explore ways to draw spiritual themes back into the classroom, rather than holding them at arms' length, as is more often the norm.

### **Significant Changes in Personal Perspective**

If there is one thing I have learned during the past several weeks in this course, it is that there is no one clear indicator of a learner's success in the second language acquisition process. A host of factors contribute to a learner's experience, and even replicating the same variables

from one proficient L2 user will not necessarily result in success with a different learner. I have gained few new insights to keep in mind as I strive to create a classroom environment that fosters success in every way possible:

- Language is God’s creation, reflecting his image, and as such it must be treated with respect.
- Learners, as all humans, are spiritual beings, and this should influence the way we treat them and conduct classroom discussions.
- Age is one factor in language learning, but it is not the only factor, nor the most important.
- A learner is not simply “motivated” or “unmotivated.” There are many different types of motivation, and some of these can be influenced by teaching practices.
- The wide variety of cognitive processing styles necessitates a varied approach when planning tasks and activities for the classroom.
- Pushing learners just beyond their comfort level to encourage them to produce language can help them learn more than if they only listen and absorb language.
- Use a wide variety of corrective feedback and select the kind that best fits the situation.

My journey of learning will continue as I study and gain additional classroom experience. A teacher’s understanding of how learning takes place—much like a learner’s task of acquiring language proficiency—is an ongoing process that will never be finished!



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