

LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND TEACHING

LEARNING A second language is a long and complex undertaking. Your whole person is affected as you struggle to reach beyond the confines of your first language and into a new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting. Total commitment, total involvement, a total physical, intellectual, and emotional response are necessary to successfully send and receive messages in a second language. Many variables are involved in the acquisition process. Language learning is not a set of easy steps that can be programmed in a quick do-it-yourself kit. So much is at stake that courses in foreign languages are often inadequate training grounds, in and of themselves, for the successful learning of a second language. Few if any people achieve fluency in a foreign language solely within the confines of the classroom.

It may appear contradictory, then, that this book is about both learning and teaching. But some of the contradiction is removed if you look at the teaching process as the facilitation of learning, in which you can teach a foreign language successfully if, among other things, you know something about that intricate web of variables that are spun together to affect how and why one learns or fails to learn a second language. Where does a teacher begin the quest for an understanding of the principles of language learning and teaching? By first considering some of the questions that you could ask.

QUESTIONS ABOUT SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Virtually any complex set of skills brings with it a host of questions. While these questions can quickly turn into "issues," because there is no simple answer to the questions, nevertheless we usually begin the process with a set of focused questions to guide our study. Current issues in second language acquisition (SLA) may be initially approached as a multitude of questions that are being asked about this complex process. Let's look at some of those questions, sorted here into some commonly used topical categories.

Learner Characteristics

Who are the learners that you are teaching? What is their ethnic, linguistic, and religious heritage? What are their native languages, levels of education, and socioeconomic characteristics? What life's experiences have they had that might affect their learning? What are their intellectual capacities, abilities, and strengths and weaknesses? How would you describe the personality of any given learner? These and other questions focus attention on some of the crucial variables affecting both learners' successes in acquiring a foreign language and teachers' capacities to enable learners to achieve that acquisition.

Linguistic Factors

No simpler a question is one that probes the nature of the subject matter itself. What is it that the learner must learn? What is language? What is communication? What does it mean when we say someone knows how to *use* a language? What is the best way to describe or systematize the target (second) language? What are the relevant differences (and commonalities) between a learner's first and second language? What properties of the target language might be difficult for a learner to master? These profound questions are of course central to the discipline of linguistics. The language teacher needs to understand the system and functioning of the second language and the differences between the first and second language of the learner. It is one thing for a teacher to speak and understand a language and yet another matter to attain the technical knowledge required to understand and explain the system of that language—its phonemes, morphemes, words, sentences, and discourse structures.

Learning Processes

How does learning take place? How can a person ensure success in language learning? What cognitive processes are utilized in second language learning? What kinds of strategies are available to a learner, and which ones are optimal? How important are factors like frequency of input, attention to form and meaning, memory and storage processes, and recall? What is the optimal inter-relationship of cognitive, affective, and physical domains for successful language learning?

Age and Acquisition

When in the life of a learner does second language learning take place? One of the key issues in second language research and teaching is a cluster of questions about differences between children and adults in learning a second language. Common observation tells us that children are "better" language learners than adults. Research shows that to be an overgeneralization, if not downright questionable.

If so, in what way does the age of learning make a difference? How do the cognitive and emotional developmental changes of childhood and young adulthood affect language acquisition?

Instructional Variables

Some second language acquisition successfully takes place outside of any educational context or classroom or teacher. In such “natural” environments, do all people learn a language equally successfully? If not, what are the ingredients for success? In what has come to be called “instructed” SLA, many questions arise. What are the effects of varying methodological approaches, textbooks, materials, teacher styles, and institutional factors? Consider the amount of time spent in classrooms learning a second language: is there an optimal length of time required for successful mastery? Should the learner be exposed to three or five or ten hours a week in the classroom? Or a five-to-seven-hour day in an intensive language program? And how “active” should a learner be outside of the classroom?

Context

Are the learners attempting to acquire the second language within the cultural and linguistic milieu of the second language, that is, in a “second” language situation in the technical sense of the term? Or are they focusing on a “foreign” language context in which the second language is heard and spoken only in an artificial environment, such as the modern language classroom in an American university or high school? How might the sociopolitical conditions of a particular country or its language policy affect the outcome of a learner’s mastery of the language? How do intercultural contrasts and similarities affect the learning process?

Purpose

Finally, the most encompassing of all questions: Why are learners attempting to acquire the second language? What are their purposes? Are they motivated by the achievement of a successful career, or by passing a foreign language requirement, or by wishing to identify closely with the culture and people of the target language? Beyond these categories, what other, emotional, personal, or intellectual reasons do learners have for pursuing this gigantic task of learning another language?

REJOICING IN OUR DEFEATS

The above questions have been posed, in very global terms, to give you an inkling of the diversity of issues involved in the quest for understanding the principles of language learning and teaching. By addressing such questions carefully and critically, you can begin to achieve a surprising number of answers as you move

through the chapters of this book. And you can hone the global questions into finer, subtler questions, which in itself is an important task, for often being able to ask the right questions is more valuable than possessing storehouses of knowledge.

At the same time, you should not labor under the impression that you can satisfactorily find final answers to all the questions. By some evaluations, the field of SLA is still in its infancy, with all the methodological and theoretical problems that come with a developing discipline (see Gregg, 2003, for example). Therefore, many of these questions will receive somewhat tentative answers, or at best, answers that must begin with the phrase, "it depends." Answers must almost always be framed in a context that can vary from one learner to another, from one moment to another. The wonderful intricacy of complex facets of human behavior will be very much with us for some time. Roger Brown's (1966, p. 326) wry remark of over four decades ago still applies:

Psychologists find it exciting when a complex mental phenomenon—something intelligent and slippery—seems about to be captured by a mechanical model. We yearn to see the model succeed. But when, at the last minute, the phenomenon proves too much for the model and darts off on some uncapturable tangent, there is something in us that rejoices at the defeat.

We can rejoice in our defeats because we know that it is the very elusiveness of the phenomenon of SLA that makes the quest for answers so exciting. Our field of inquiry is no simple, unidimensional reality. It is "slippery" in every way.

The chapters of this book are designed to give you a picture of both the slipperiness of SLA and the systematic storehouse of reliable knowledge that is now available to us. As you consider the issues, chapter by chapter, you are led on a quest for your own personal, integrated understanding of how people learn—and sometimes fail to learn—a second language. That quest is *eclectic*: no single theory or hypothesis will provide a magic formula for all learners in all contexts. And the quest is *cautious*: you will be urged to be as critical as you can in considering the merit of various models and theories and research findings. By the end of the final chapter, however, you will no doubt surprise yourself on how many pieces of this giant puzzle you can actually put together!

Thomas Kuhn (1970) referred to "normal science" as a process of puzzle solving in which part of the task of the scientist, in this case the teacher, is to discover the pieces and then to fit the pieces together. Some of the pieces of the language learning puzzle have been located and set in place. Others are not yet discovered, and the careful defining of questions will lead to finding those pieces. We can then undertake the task of fitting the pieces together into a **paradigm**—an interlocking design, a theory of second language acquisition.

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Research Findings: Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has sold over a million copies and has been translated into sixteen languages. Applying Kuhn's popular theory to our current language teaching practice, we can say that Communicative Language Teaching (and, perhaps, Task-Based Teaching—see Chapter 8) is accepted as “normal” and as our current “paradigm.”

Teaching Implications: As you look at language classes you have taken (and perhaps taught), do you think there will be an “intellectually violent” change (to paraphrase Kuhn) in which our pedagogy will be markedly transformed? If so, what do you suppose the next “revolution” in language teaching will look like?

That theory, like a jigsaw puzzle, needs to be coherent and unified. If only one point of view is taken—if you look at only one facet of second language learning and teaching—you will derive an incomplete, partial theory. The second language teacher, with eyes wide open to the total picture, needs to form an integrated understanding of the many aspects of the process of second language learning.

In order to begin to ask further questions and to find answers to some of those questions, let's first address a fundamental concern in problem-posing: defining or delimiting the focus of our inquiry. Since this book is about language, learning, and teaching, let's see what happens when we try to “define” those three terms.

LANGUAGE

A definition is a statement that captures the key features of a concept. Those features may vary, depending on your own (or the lexicographer's) understanding of the construct. And, most important, that understanding is essentially a “theory” that explicates the construct. So a definition of a term may be thought of as a condensed version of a theory. Conversely, a theory is simply—or not so simply—an extended definition. Defining, therefore, is serious business: it requires choices about which facets of something are worthy of being included.

Suppose you were stopped by a reporter on the street, and in the course of an interview about your field of study, you were asked: “Well, since you're interested in second language acquisition, please define *language* in a sentence or two.” You would no doubt dig deep into your memory for a typical dictionary-type definition of language. Such definitions, if pursued seriously, could lead to a lexicographer's

wild-goose chase, but they also can reflect a reasonably coherent synopsis of current understanding of just what it is that linguists are trying to study.

If you had had a chance to consult the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (2003, p. 699), you might have responded to your questioner with a relatively standard statement like "a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings." Or, if you had read Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (1994), you might have come up with a sophisticated statement such as:

Language is a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently (p. 18).

On the other hand, you might, with Ron Scollon (2004, p. 272), wish to emphasize that, first of all, language is *not* something that comes in "nicely packaged units" and that it certainly *is* "a multiple, complex, and kaleidoscopic phenomenon." Further, depending on how fussy you wanted to get in your response, you might also have included some mention of (1) the creativity of language, (2) the presumed primacy of speech over writing, and (3) the universality of language among human beings.

A consolidation of a number of possible definitions of **language** yields the following composite definition.

1. Language is systematic.
2. Language is a set of arbitrary symbols.
3. Those symbols are primarily vocal, but may also be visual.
4. The symbols have conventionalized meanings to which they refer.
5. Language is used for communication.
6. Language operates in a speech community or culture.
7. Language is essentially human, although possibly not limited to humans.
8. Language is acquired by all people in much the same way; language and language learning both have universal characteristics.

These eight statements provide a reasonably concise "25-word-or-less" definition of language. But the simplicity of the eightfold definition should not be allowed to mask the sophistication of linguistic research underlying each concept. Enormous fields and subfields and yearlong university courses, are suggested in each of the eight categories. Consider some of these possible areas:

1. Explicit and formal accounts of the system of language on several possible levels (e.g., phonological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic analysis)
2. The symbolic nature of language; the relationship between language and reality; the philosophy of language; the history of language

3. Phonetics; phonology; writing systems; the role of gesture, distance, eye contact, and other “paralinguistic” features of language
4. Semantics; language and cognition; psycholinguistics
5. Communication systems; speaker-hearer interaction; sentence processing
6. Dialectology; sociolinguistics; language and culture; pragmatics; bilingualism and second language acquisition
7. Human language and nonhuman communication; neurolinguistics; innate factors; genetic transmission; nature vs. nurture
8. Language universals; first language acquisition

Serious and extensive thinking about these eight topics involves a complex journey through a labyrinth of linguistic science—a maze that continues to be negotiated. Yet the language teacher needs to know something about this system of communication that we call language. Can foreign language teachers effectively teach a language if they do not know, even in general, something about the relationship between language and cognition, writing systems, nonverbal communication, sociolinguistics, and first language acquisition? And if the second language learner is being asked to be successful in acquiring a system of communication of such vast complexity, isn't it reasonable that the teacher have awareness of what the components of that system are?

Your understanding of the components of language determines to a large extent how you teach a language. If, for example, you believe that nonverbal communication is a key to successful second language learning, you will devote some attention in your curriculum to nonverbal systems and cues. If you perceive language as a phenomenon that can be dismantled into thousands of discrete pieces and those pieces programmatically taught one by one, you will attend carefully to an understanding of the discrete forms of language. If you think language is essentially cultural and interactive, your classroom methodology will be imbued with sociolinguistic strategies and communicative tasks.

This book touches on some of the general aspects of language as defined above. More specific aspects will have to be understood in the context of an academic program in a particular language, in which specialized study of linguistics is obviously recommended along with a careful analysis of the foreign language itself.

LEARNING AND TEACHING

We can also ask questions about constructs like learning and teaching. Consider again some traditional definitions. A search in contemporary dictionaries reveals that **learning** is “acquiring or getting of knowledge of a subject or a skill by study, experience, or instruction.” Oddly, an educational psychologist would define learning even more succinctly as “a change in an individual caused by experience” (Slavin, 2003, p. 138). Similarly, **teaching**, which is implied in the first definition

of learning, may be defined as “showing or helping someone to learn how to do something, giving instructions, guiding in the study of something, providing with knowledge, causing to know or understand.” Isn’t it curious that professional lexicographers seem to have such difficulty in devising a definition of something as universal as teaching? More than perhaps anything else, such definitions reflect the difficulty of defining complex concepts.

Breaking down the components of the definition of learning, we can extract, as we did with language, domains of research and inquiry.

1. Learning is acquisition or “getting.”
2. Learning is retention of information or skill.
3. Retention implies storage systems, memory, cognitive organization.
4. Learning involves active, conscious focus on and acting upon events outside or inside the organism.
5. Learning is relatively permanent but subject to forgetting.
6. Learning involves some form of practice, perhaps reinforced practice.
7. Learning is a change in behavior.

These concepts can also give way to a number of subfields within the discipline of psychology: acquisition processes, perception, memory (storage) systems, short- and long-term memory, recall, motivation, conscious and subconscious learning styles and strategies, theories of forgetting, reinforcement, the role of practice. Very quickly the concept of learning becomes every bit as complex as the concept of language. Yet the second language learner brings all these (and more) variables into play in the learning of a second language.

Teaching cannot be defined apart from learning. Teaching is guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn, setting the conditions for learning. Your understanding of how the learner learns will determine your philosophy of education, your teaching style, your approach, methods, and classroom techniques. If, like B. F. Skinner, you look at learning as a process of operant conditioning through a carefully paced program of reinforcement, you will teach accordingly. If you view second language learning as a deductive rather than an inductive process you will probably choose to present copious rules and paradigms to your student rather than let them “discover” those rules inductively.

An extended definition—or theory—of teaching will spell out governing principles for choosing certain methods and techniques. A theory of teaching, in harmony with your integrated understanding of the learner and of the subject matter to be learned, will point the way to successful procedures on a given day for given learners under the various constraints of the particular context of learning. In other words, your theory of teaching is your theory of learning “stoc on its head.”

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

While the general definitions of language, learning, and teaching offered above might meet with the approval of most linguists, psychologists, and educators, points of disagreement become apparent after a little probing of the components of each definition. For example, is language primarily a “system of formal units” or a “means for social interaction”? Or, for better retention, should a teacher emphasize extrinsic or intrinsic motivation in students? Differing viewpoints emerge from equally knowledgeable scholars, usually over the extent to which one viewpoint or another should receive primacy.

Yet with all the possible disagreements among applied linguists and SLA researchers, some historical patterns emerge that highlight trends and fashions in the study of second language acquisition. These trends will be described here in the form of three different schools of thought—primarily in the fields of linguistics and psychology—that follow somewhat historically, even though components of each school overlap chronologically to some extent. Bear in mind that such a sketch may suggest dichotomies in philosophical positions, and such contrasts are rarely so simplistic in the study of issues in SLA.

Structural Linguistics and Behavioral Psychology

In the 1940s and 1950s, the **structural**, or **descriptive**, school of linguistics, with its advocates—Leonard Bloomfield, Edward Sapir, Charles Hockett, Charles Fries, and others—prided itself in a rigorous application of scientific observations of human languages. Only “publicly observable responses” could be subject to investigation. The linguist’s task, according to the **structuralist**, was to describe human languages and to identify the structural characteristics of those languages. An important axiom of structural linguistics was that languages can differ from each other without limit, and that no preconceptions could apply across languages. Freeman Twaddell (1935, p. 57) stated this principle in perhaps its most extreme terms:

Whatever our attitude toward mind, spirit, soul, etc., as realities, we must agree that the scientist proceeds as though there were no such things, as though all his information were acquired through processes of his physiological nervous system. Insofar as he occupies himself with psychical, nonmaterial forces, the scientist is not a scientist. The scientific method is quite simply the convention that mind does not exist . . .

Twaddell was underscoring the mandate for the structural linguist to examine only overtly observable data, and to ignore the “mind” insofar as the latter represented a **mentalist** approach that gave credence to unobservable guesses, hunches, and intuition. Such attitudes prevailed in B. F. Skinner’s thought, particularly

in *Verbal Behavior* (1957), in which he said that any notion of “idea” or “meaning” is explanatory fiction, and that the speaker is merely the locus of verbal behavior, not the cause. Charles Osgood (1957) reinstated meaning in verbal behavior, explaining it as a “representational mediation process,” but still did not depart from a generally nonmentalistic view of language.

Of further importance to the structural or descriptive linguist was the notion that language could be dismantled into small pieces or units and that these units could be described scientifically, contrasted, and added up again to form the whole. From this principle emerged an unchecked rush of linguists, in the 1940s and 1950s, to the far reaches of the earth to engage in the rigorous production of detailed descriptions of “exotic” languages.

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Research Findings: The prevailing paradigm in linguistic research in the 1940s and 1950s viewed language as a linear, structured system that described grammatical sequences in terms of separate components that could comprise a sentence. These analyses were what Noam Chomsky later called “surface structure” relationships.

Teaching Implications: No one may have better manifested structural linguistics in the classroom than Charles Fries, whose “structural drills” and “pattern practices” were described in his (1945) book, *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*, and in his (1952) book, *The Structure of English*. The very popular Audiolingual Method (see Chapter 4) drew many insights from Fries’s seminal work. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of pattern drills in the language classroom?

Among psychologists, a **behavioral** paradigm also focused on publicly observable responses—those that can be objectively perceived, recorded, and measured. The **scientific method** was rigorously adhered to, and therefore such concepts as consciousness and intuition were regarded as mentalistic, illegitimate domains of inquiry. The unreliability of observation of states of consciousness, thinking, concept formation, or the acquisition of knowledge made such topics impossible to examine in a behavioral framework. Typical behavioral models were classical and operant conditioning, rote verbal learning, instrumental learning, discrimination learning, and other **empirical** approaches to studying human behavior. You may be familiar with the classical experiments with Pavlov’s dog and Skinner’s boxes; these

too typify the position that organisms can be conditioned to respond in desired ways, given the correct degree and scheduling of reinforcement. (Behaviorism will be described in more detail in Chapter 4.)

Generative Linguistics and Cognitive Psychology

In the decade of the 1960s, **generative-transformational linguistics** emerged through the influence of Noam Chomsky and a number of his followers. Chomsky was trying to show that human language cannot be scrutinized simply in terms of observable stimuli and responses or the volumes of raw data gathered by field linguists. The generative linguist was interested not only in describing language (achieving the level of **descriptive adequacy**) but also in arriving at an **explanatory** level of adequacy in the study of language, that is, a “principled basis, independent of any particular language, for the selection of the descriptively adequate grammar of each language” (Chomsky, 1964, p. 63).

Early seeds of the generative-transformational revolution were planted near the beginning of the twentieth century. Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) claimed that there was a difference between *parole* (what Skinner “observes,” and what Chomsky called **performance**), on the one hand, and *langue* (akin to the concept of **competence**, or our underlying and unobservable language ability). A few decades later, however, descriptive linguists chose largely to ignore *langue* and to study *parole*, as was noted above. The revolution brought about by generative linguistics broke with the descriptivists’ preoccupation with performance—the outward manifestation of language—and capitalized on the important distinction between the overtly observable aspects of language and the hidden levels of meaning and thought that give birth to and generate observable linguistic performance.

Similarly, **cognitive** psychologists asserted that meaning, understanding, and knowing were significant data for psychological study. Instead of focusing rather mechanistically on stimulus-response connections, cognitivists tried to discover psychological principles of organization and functioning. David Ausubel (1965, p. 4) noted:

From the standpoint of cognitive theorists, the attempt to ignore conscious states or to reduce cognition to mediational processes reflective of implicit behavior not only removes from the field of psychology what is most worth studying but also dangerously oversimplifies highly complex psychological phenomena.

Cognitive psychologists, like generative linguists, sought to discover underlying motivations and deeper structures of human behavior by using a **rational approach**. That is, they freed themselves from the strictly empirical study typical of behaviorists and employed the tools of logic, reason, extrapolation, and inference in order to derive explanations for human behavior. Going beyond merely descriptive adequacy to explanatory power took on utmost importance.

Both the structural linguist and the behavioral psychologist were interested in description, in answering *what* questions about human behavior: objective measurement of behavior in controlled circumstances. The generative linguist and cognitive psychologist were, to be sure, interested in the *what* question; but they were far more interested in a more ultimate question, *why*: what underlying factors—innate, psychological, social, or environmental circumstances—caused a particular behavior in a human being?

If you were to observe someone walk into your house, pick up a chair and fling it through your window, and then walk out, different kinds of questions could be asked. One set of questions would relate to *what* happened: the physical description of the person, the time of day, the size of the chair, the impact of the chair, and so forth. Another set of questions would ask *why* the person did what he or she did: what were the person's motives and psychological state, what might have been the cause of the behavior, and so on. The first set of questions is very rigorous and exacting: it allows no flaw, no mistake in measurement; but does it give you ultimate answers? The second set of questions is richer, but obviously riskier. By daring to ask some difficult questions about the unobserved, we may lose some ground but gain more profound insight about human behavior.

Constructivism: A Multidisciplinary Approach

Constructivism is hardly a new school of thought. Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, names often associated with constructivism, are not by any means new to the scene of language studies. Yet, in a variety of **post-structuralist** theoretical positions, constructivism emerged as a prevailing paradigm only in the last part of the twentieth century, and is now almost an orthodoxy. A refreshing characteristic of constructivism is its integration of linguistic, psychological, and sociological paradigms, in contrast to the professional chasms that often divided those disciplines in the previous century. Now, with its emphasis on social interaction and the discovery, or construction, of meaning, the three disciplines have much more common ground.

What is constructivism, and how does it differ from the other two viewpoints described above? First, it will be helpful to think of two branches of constructivism: cognitive and social. In the cognitive version of constructivism, emphasis is placed on the importance of learners constructing their own representation of reality. "Learners must individually discover and transform complex information if they are to make it their own, [suggesting] a more active role for students in their own learning than is typical in many classrooms" (Slavin, 2003, pp. 257-258). Such claims are rooted in Piaget's (1954, 1955, 1970; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) seminal work in the middle of the twentieth century, but have taken that long to become widely accepted views. For Piaget, "learning is a developmental process that involves change, self-generation, and construction, each building on prior learning experiences" (Kaufman, 2004, p. 304).

Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cooperative learning in constructing both cognitive and emotional images of reality.

Spivey (1997, p. 24) noted that constructivist research tends to focus on “individuals engaged in social practices, . . . on a collaborative group, [or] on a global community.” The champion of social constructivism is Vygotsky (1978), who advocated the view that “children’s thinking and meaning-making is socially constructed and emerges out of their social interactions with their environment” (Kaufman, 2004, p. 304).

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Research Findings: Constructivism is a school of thought that emphasizes both the learner’s role in constructing meaning out of available linguistic input and the importance of social interaction in creating a new linguistic system. Early constructivists like Vygotsky and Piaget actively emphasized their views many decades ago. What took the language *teaching* profession so long to apply such thinking to classroom practices?

Teaching Implications: Perhaps prevailing views of behavioral psychology curbed an outburst of interactive language teaching. However, as early as the 1970s, some methods advocated the central role of the learner’s construction of language (the Silent Way and Community Language Learning) and the importance of meaningful interaction (early forms of the Notional-Functional Syllabus, which started in the United Kingdom). What evidence of constructivism do you see in current foreign language classrooms?

One of the most popular concepts advanced by Vygotsky was the notion of a **zone of proximal development (ZPD)** in every learner: the distance between learners’ existing developmental state and their potential development. Put another way, the ZPD describes tasks that a learner has not yet learned but is capable of learning with appropriate stimuli. The ZPD is an important facet of social constructivism because it describes tasks “that a child cannot yet do alone but could do with the assistance of more competent peers or adults” (Slavin, 2003, p. 44; see also Karpov & Haywood, 1998). A number of applications of Vygotsky’s ZPD have been made to foreign language instruction (Lantolf, 2000; Nassaji & Cumming, 2000; Marchenkova, 2005) in both adult and child second language learning contexts.

Vygotsky’s concept of the ZPD contrasted rather sharply with Piaget’s theory of learning in that the former saw a *unity* of learning and development while the latter saw stages of development setting a precondition, or readiness, for learning (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998). Piaget stressed the importance of individual cognitive development as a relatively solitary act. Biological timetables and stages of development were basic; social interaction was claimed only to trigger development at

the right moment in time. On the other hand, Vygotsky maintained that social interaction was foundational in cognitive development and rejected the notion of pre-determined stages.

Closely allied to a Vygotskian social constructivist perspective is that of Mikhail Bakhtin (1986, 1990), the Russian literary theorist who has now captured the attention of SLA researchers and practitioners (Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenkova, 2005). Bakhtin contended that language is "immersed in a social and cultural context, and its central function is to serve as a medium of communication." In this spirit, the early years of the new millennium have seen increasing emphasis on sociocultural dimensions of SLA, or what Watson-Gegeo (2004) describes as a language socialization paradigm for SLA: a new synthesis that "involves a reconsideration of mind, language, and epistemology, and a recognition that cognition originates in social interaction and is shaped by cultural and sociopolitical processes" (Watson-Gegeo, 2004, p. 331).

Researchers studying first and second language acquisition have demonstrated constructivist perspectives through studies of conversational discourse, sociocultural factors in learning, and interactionist theories. In many ways, constructivist perspectives are a natural successor to cognitively based studies of universal grammar, information processing, memory, artificial intelligence, and interlanguage systematicity. (Note: These terms will be defined and explained in subsequent chapters of this book.)

All three of the historical positions described in this section—structural/behavioral, generative/cognitive, and constructivist—must be seen as important in creating balanced descriptions of second language acquisition. Consider for a moment the analogy of a very high mountain, viewed from a distance. From one direction the mountain may have a sharp peak, easily identified glaciers, and distinctive rock formations. From another direction, however, the same mountain might now appear to have two peaks (the second formerly hidden from view) and different configurations of its slopes. From still another direction, yet further characteristics emerge, heretofore unobserved. The study of SLA is very much like the viewing of our mountain: we need multiple tools and vantage points in order to ascertain the whole picture.

Table 1.1 summarizes concepts and approaches described in the three perspectives above. The table may help to pinpoint certain broad ideas that are associated with the respective positions. The patterns that are illustrated are typical of what Kuhn (1970) described as the structure of scientific revolutions. A successful paradigm is followed by a period of anomaly (doubt, uncertainty, questioning of prevailing theory), then crisis (the fall of the existing paradigm) with all the professional insecurity that comes therewith; and then finally a new paradigm, a novel theory, is put together. This cycle is evident in both psychology and linguistics, although the limits and bounds are not always easily perceived—perhaps less easily perceived in psychology, in which all three paradigms currently operate somewhat simultaneously. The cyclical nature of theories underscores the fact that no single theory or paradigm is right or wrong. It is impossible to refute with finality one perspective with another. Some truth can be found in virtually every critical approach to the study of reality.

Table 1.1 Schools of thought in second language acquisition

Time Frame	Schools of Thought	Typical Themes
Early 1900s and 1940s and 1950s	Structural Linguistics and Behavioral Psychology	Description Observable performance Scientific method Empiricism Surface structure Conditioning Reinforcement
1960s, 1970s, and 1980s	Generative Linguistics and Cognitive Psychology	Generative linguistics Acquisition, innateness Interlanguage Systematicity Universal grammar Competence Deep structure
1980s, 1990s, and 2000s	Constructivism	Interactive discourse Sociocultural variables Cooperative learning Discovery learning Construction of meaning Interlanguage variability

NINETEEN CENTURIES OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

A survey of research and theoretical trends in SLA remains abstract and unfocused without its application to the practical concerns of pedagogy in the classroom. Besides, most readers of this book are ultimately interested in language pedagogy in one form or another, and so in an attempt to help to build bridges between theory and practice, I will offer occasional relevant historical commentaries on language teaching, and link those descriptions to topics and issues being treated. In so doing, I hope to acquaint you progressively with some of the major methodological trends and issues on the pedagogical side of the profession.

So far in this chapter, the focus has been on research over the past century or so of linguistics and psychology, and in the last section of this chapter, I will draw your attention to pedagogical trends and issues in the twentieth century. What do we know about language teaching in the two or three millennia prior? The answer is: not very much.

Kelly's (1969) informative survey of language teaching over "twenty-five centuries" revealed interesting anecdotal accounts of foreign language instruction but few if any research-based language teaching methods. In the Western world, "foreign" language learning in schools was synonymous with the learning of Latin or

Greek. Latin, thought to promote intellectuality through “mental gymnastics,” was until relatively recently held to be indispensable to an adequate higher education. Latin was taught by means of what has been called the **Classical Method**: focus on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary and of various declensions and conjugations, translation of texts, doing written exercises. As other languages began to be taught in educational institutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Classical Method was adopted as the chief means for teaching foreign languages. Little thought was given at the time to teaching oral use of languages; after all, languages were not being taught primarily to learn oral/aural communication, but to learn for the sake of being “scholarly” or, in some instances, for gaining a reading proficiency in a foreign language. Since there was little if any theoretical research on second language acquisition in general, or on the acquisition of reading proficiency, foreign languages were taught as any other skill was taught.

So language teaching before the twentieth century is best captured as a “tradition” that, in various manifestations and adaptations, has been practiced in language classrooms worldwide even up to the present time. Late in the nineteenth century, the Classical Method came to be known as the **Grammar Translation Method**. There was little to distinguish Grammar Translation from what had gone on in foreign language classrooms for centuries, beyond a focus on grammatical rules as the basis for translating from the second to the native language. But the Grammar Translation Method remarkably withstood attempts at the outset of the twentieth century to “reform” language teaching methodology, and to this day it remains a standard methodology for language teaching in educational institutions. Prator and Celce-Murcia (1979, p. 3) listed the major characteristics of Grammar Translation:

1. Classes taught in the mother tongue; little use of the L2
2. Much vocabulary taught in the form of lists of isolated words
3. Elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar
4. Reading of difficult classical texts begun early
5. Texts treated as exercises in grammatical analysis
6. Occasional drills and exercises in translating sentences from L1 to L2
7. Little or no attention to pronunciation

It is remarkable, in one sense, that this method has been so stalwart among many competing models. It does virtually nothing to enhance a student’s communicative ability in the language. It is “remembered with distaste by thousands of school learners, for whom foreign language learning meant a tedious experience of memorizing endless lists of unusable grammar rules and vocabulary and attempting to produce perfect translations of stilted or literary prose” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 4).

In another sense, however, one can understand why Grammar Translation is so popular. It requires few specialized skills on the part of teachers. Tests of grammar

rules and of translations are easy to construct and can be objectively scored. Many standardized tests of foreign languages still do not attempt to tap into communicative abilities, so students have little motivation to go beyond grammar analogies, translations, and rote exercises. And it is sometimes successful in leading a student toward a reading knowledge of a second language. But, as Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 7) pointed out, "it has no advocates. It is a method for which there is no theory. There is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology, or educational theory." As we continue to examine theoretical principles in this book, I think we will understand more fully the "theorylessness" of the Grammar Translation Method.

LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Against the backdrop of the previous 19 centuries, a glance through the past century or so of language teaching gives us, ironically, a rather refreshingly interesting picture of varied interpretations of the "best" way to teach a foreign language. Perhaps beginning with François Gouin's (1880) *Series Method*, foreign language teaching underwent some revolutionary trends, all of which in one way or another came under the scrutiny of scientific (or observational) research.

As schools of thought have come and gone, so have language teaching trends waxed and waned in popularity. Historically, pedagogical innovation has been the beneficiary of the theoretical research described in the previous section, as witnessed by the influence of such research on trends in language teaching. At the same time, language classrooms and their innovative teachers and students have been laboratories of research that have, in turn, informed theoretical stances as they have changed over time.

Albert Marckwardt (1972, p. 5) saw these "changing winds and shifting sands" as a cyclical pattern in which a new paradigm (to use Kuhn's term) of teaching methodology emerged about every quarter of a century, with each new method breaking from the old but at the same time taking with it some of the positive aspects of the previous paradigm. More recently, Mitchell and Vidal (2001) described our perhaps misguided penchant for characterizing the last century of language teaching metaphorically as a pendulum swinging back and forth between a number of opposing options: focus on accuracy vs. focus on fluency, separation of skills vs. integration of skills, and teacher-centered vs. learner-centered approaches, to name a few. Mitchell and Vidal suggested that a new metaphor may better depict our journey across time: "that of a major river, constantly flowing, fed by many sources of water—rivers, streams, springs in remote territories, all fed by rain on wide expanses of land" (p. 27).

One of the best examples of both the cyclical and fluvial nature of methods is seen in the revolutionary **Audiolingual Method** (ALM) of the late 1940s and 1950s. The ALM, with its overemphasis on oral production drills, borrowed tenets from its predecessor by almost half a century, the **Direct Method**, but had essentially

sprung from behavioral theories of learning of the time. The ALM was a rejection of its classical predecessor, the Grammar Translation Method, by diminishing if not obliterating the need for metacognitive focus on the forms of language. Within a short time, however, with the increasing popularity of cognitive psychology, ALM critics were advocating more attention to rules and to the “cognitive code” of language, which, to some, smacked of a return to Grammar Translation! Shifting sands indeed, and the ebb and flow of paradigms.

Since the early 1970s, the symbiotic relationship of theoretical disciplines and teaching methodology has been continued to manifest itself. The field of psychology, as noted above in outlining tenets of constructivism, has witnessed a growing interest in interpersonal relationships, the value of group work, and the use of numerous cooperative strategies for attaining desired goals. The same era has seen linguists searching ever more deeply for answers to the nature of communication and communicative competence and for explanations of the interactive, socio-cultural process of language acquisition.

The language teaching profession has mirrored these theoretical trends with approaches and techniques that have stressed the importance of self-esteem, intrinsic motivation, students cooperatively learning together, of developing individual strategies for constructing meaning, and above all of focusing on the communicative process in language learning. Some of these methodological innovations will be described in subsequent chapters of this book, as they pertain to issues and topics being discussed.

Today, many of the pedagogical springs and rivers of the last few decades are appropriately captured in the term **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**, now a catchphrase for language teachers. CLT, to be discussed further in Chapter 8, is an eclectic blend of the contributions of previous methods into the best of what a teacher can provide in authentic uses of the second language in the classroom. Indeed, the single greatest challenge in the profession is to move significantly beyond the teaching of rules, patterns, definitions, and other knowledge “about” language to the point that we are teaching our students to communicate genuinely, spontaneously, and meaningfully in the second language.

A significant difference between current language teaching practices and those of, say, a half a century ago, is the absence of proclaimed “orthodoxies” and “best” methods. We are well aware that **methods**, as they were conceived of 40 or 50 years ago or so, are too narrow and too constrictive to apply to a wide range of learners in an enormous number of situational contexts. There are no instant recipes. No quick and easy method is guaranteed to provide success. As Bell (2003), Brown (2001), Kumaravadivelu (2001), and others have appropriately shown, pedagogical trends in language teaching now spur us to develop a principled basis—sometimes called an **approach** (Richards & Rodgers, 2001)—upon which teachers can choose particular designs and techniques for teaching a foreign language in a specific context. Every learner is unique. Every teacher is unique. Every learner-teacher relationship is unique, and every context is unique. Your task as a teacher is to understand the properties of those relationships and contexts.