PART ONE

What Do Language Teachers Think About?
What Should I Know About Language Learners and Language Teaching Settings?

- What difference does it make if you learn a language in a classroom or in the community where it is spoken?
- What kinds of help do people need to learn a new language?
- Why do you think that some people are more successful at language learning than others?

LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND LANGUAGE TEACHING SETTINGS

Language teachers work with many types of learners in a wide variety of settings. Some teachers work with learners who are surrounded by the language they are trying to learn (this is called a second language setting), while others teach a language that is only spoken by a distant community (a foreign language setting). Many teachers, such as history or fourth-grade teachers, do not immediately think of themselves as language teachers, but when some of their students are still learning English, they are also language teachers. Bilingual teachers have the triple objective of helping their students learn English and content subjects such as science or math while at the same time encouraging their first language development.

Teachers are especially interested in differences among language learners because they hope to find ways to help all of their students become more successful. Language learners differ with respect to emotions, language aptitude, learning styles, approaches to language learning, and, of course, their age. Although learner characteristics are difficult to change, teachers are sometimes able to help students develop more positive characteristics and become better language learners. Other times, teachers are able to adjust language teaching approaches for their particular students and teaching situation. Many educators feel that helping students become better language learners is essential so that they can become more autonomous and extend their language learning beyond the classroom.
Types of Language Learning Settings

The academic discipline called second language acquisition is the basis for the practices that all language teachers should employ. This field considers how people learn second languages and the factors that influence their learning. Second language acquisition includes learning a language where it is spoken—a second language setting—or learning a language that is spoken by a distant community—a foreign language setting. English learners in the United States are generally classified as second language learners because they are surrounded by English in school, in the media, and in the community. Many language teachers also distinguish the acquisition or unconscious development of a language through exposure from conscious learning through study and practice. (This distinction is associated with the input hypothesis, which will be explained in the next chapter.)

Despite these distinctions, second language acquisition is the general label for the academic field that studies language learning in all its variations: second language acquisition, second language learning, foreign language acquisition, and foreign language learning. The following descriptions of learners represent each of the four types of language development. Decide which terms best describe each of the learners.

VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM

Although many people associate language acquisition with second language settings and language learning with foreign language settings, either process may be used in any learning context. Identify the setting and type of learning for each of the following people. The first answer is already filled in.

Xu is an international student from China studying biochemistry in the United States. He is sitting on a park bench practicing the pronunciation of some chemistry terms he needs to use in a presentation to the freshman chemistry class he is teaching.

Second Language Learning. Xu is studying in an environment where English is spoken (second) and using conscious effort to improve his pronunciation of a list of terms (learning).

Marina is an English learner in the third grade in the United States. She is listening and watching as her English-speaking teacher uses the blackboard to explain multiplication.

Second Language Learning. Marina is learning in an environment where English is spoken (second) and receiving conscious instruction to improve her understanding of a mathematical concept (learning).
In addition to the differences between second and foreign language settings, there are several different types of language classes. **Stand-alone classes** are separate classes that students attend for at least part of the school day. This arrangement is typical in middle or high schools where students change classes and teachers on a regular basis. The typical stand-alone class is taught by a teacher who specializes in working with language learners, and the curriculum focuses primarily on language development. In the case of **English as a second language (ESL)** in the United States, stand-alone classes often include students of several first-language backgrounds and grade levels, and the teacher often devotes some class time to helping students with assignments from their other classes. Students in stand-alone classes may range from recent arrivals to the United States with very little or no English ability, to students who are almost ready to move to the regular **mainstream school program**. When there is a range of first languages, ages, and language proficiency levels, stand-alone teachers must **differentiate** instruction for each learner or group of learners in their classes. ESL teachers also consult with their students’ other teachers so they can incorporate relevant content material into their lesson plans. **Pull-out programs** are more common at the elementary school level in the United States. In this arrangement, students leave their regular class for special language instruction. Pull-out classes tend to be smaller and more homogenous.
than stand-alone classes, with the teacher working with a single age group at a time. Since pull-out teachers work with the entire school population, they need to be prepared to work with learners ranging from early childhood—pre-K and kindergarten—to early adolescence. Pull-out teachers differentiate instruction for each age group, proficiency level, and so on, and they typically work closely with each child’s classroom teacher to devise lessons that will complement the student’s work in the regular classroom and to monitor their students’ progress. At the middle and high school levels, a number of school districts have recently implemented newcomer center programs for newly arrived language learners. These programs offer both English and content instruction and other services in a single place. They are usually directed at learners who have had gaps in their schooling and/or low levels of literacy in their native language.

Students in bilingual education programs receive instruction in both their first and second languages to keep them from falling behind in their content learning and to encourage the development of their first language while they are learning English. The amount of ESL instruction within bilingual classes can vary greatly depending on the type of bilingual program, but typically a single teacher is responsible for teaching both the first and second language as well as the academic content. Bilingual teachers, thus, have the advantage of knowing their students’ stage of first language development as well as how the learners will need to use both languages in their content learning. Bilingual teachers can, therefore, develop lesson plans that logically integrate their students’ language and content learning needs. While most bilingual education programs only include English learners (ELs), dual-language programs are designed to teach a new language simultaneously to two groups of language learners. In the United States, these programs are typically composed of Spanish- and English-speaking students with approximately half of the instructional time in each language. In this way, the two groups of students have the experience of learning through both their first language and the new language, and they also have contact with peers from the other language group. Importantly, dual-language programs value and actively promote the development of learners’ oral language proficiency and literacy in two languages.

In spite of the many possible ways of organizing English instruction, many English learners in the United States receive little if any special language instruction. Some states have mandated English-only instruction for ELs, while others have moved to an instructional model where all or most teachers have some ESL training. This approach makes regular classroom teachers rather than ESL specialists or bilingual teachers responsible for providing for the needs of ELs. In contrast, sheltered English refers to an approach where ELs are grouped together so that they do not have to compete with native English speakers while they are supported in their development of academic skills and competence in academic English. (Chapter 3 discusses the SIOP Model and other approaches to Sheltered Instruction; Chapter 8 is devoted to the topic of providing English language instruction through the mainstream content curriculum, including the CALLA approach.) Too often, however, ELs are left on their own to “sink or swim” in classes designed for native English speakers. Language educators use the pejorative term submersion when talking about putting ELs in regular classes with native English-speaking peers and
giving them no extra support while they are learning English. Submersion contrasts sharply with the practices of language immersion, sheltered English, or bilingual education where students are put into a target language environment with the recognition that they are language learners and are given necessary assistance.

In addition to ESL and EL, it is important to mention a number of common terms and acronyms that language teachers use to distinguish various language learning settings. English as a second language (ESL) is often distinguished from English as a foreign language (EFL), and the letter t for teaching can be placed in front of both sets of initials to form TESL and TEFL. The term TESOL, standing for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, is also commonly used. ESP and LSP translate to English or languages for specific purposes and refer to classes like English for Engineers or Spanish for Health Care Professionals. Similarly, EAP refers to English for academic purposes. These types of specialized classes recognize that learners have a range of learning needs and purposes.

Language teachers commonly use the terms English learner (EL) or English language learner (ELL), English language learning or development (ELL/ELD), languages other than English (LOTE), and world languages because the large number of non-English speakers in the United States has made the distinction between foreign and second languages unclear. For example, it would seem logical to classify English learners in the United States as second language learners, since they should have many opportunities to speak and listen to English; but if they live in segregated neighborhoods and remain with their peers in special English or bilingual classes in school, in some ways they are more similar to foreign language learners. In addition, world language students today have many more opportunities to interact with speakers of their target language than previously, and the use of the Internet and digital media further blurs the boundaries between second and foreign language learning. Moreover, world language classes often include heritage learners who have a family connection to that language and possibly some language proficiency. Some educators also worry that the use of either second or foreign puts an unnecessarily negative label on the learners. Similarly, the older term limited-English proficient (LEP) is seen as negative when compared to English learner. Language educators are increasingly using the term emergent bilingual to emphasize the importance of maintaining English learners’ first language and to recognize that learners of world languages also possess their original language.

Learner Characteristics

In addition to being in different learning circumstances, language learners themselves differ in many important ways that can influence their language learning. Language teachers have generally been most concerned with three types of learner characteristics: affective (or emotional) factors, cognitive factors, and metacognitive factors.

Emotional factors include students’ feelings about language learning and toward their particular target language and culture. Cognitive factors include the different ways that people process information and are considered to be less changeable than other learner differences. When people speak of language aptitude, they
are usually speaking of different cognitive abilities that may help people learn languages. Finally, learners think about and control their language learning in different ways. Language learning strategies, study skills, and beliefs about language learning fall in this category and are referred to as metacognitive factors.

Language Learning Emotions

**Attitudes and Motivation.** Language learners have very different goals for language learning. Older learners often have clearly defined goals involving earning a living, advanced schooling, helping their children with schoolwork, or understanding another culture, while younger learners do not think so much about learning a language but about wanting to fit in with the other students at school. Many scholars have found a strong relationship between motivation and language learning achievement. Of course, a relationship between motivation and achievement is not surprising; language learning requires a good deal of time and effort, and motivated students are more likely to expend effort as well as to seek out learning opportunities. In the 1970s, Gardner and Lambert (1972) identified two types of language learning motivation: **instrumental motivation** and **integrative motivation.** Instrumentally motivated learners have a pragmatic reason for learning a language, such as passing a high school exit examination or getting a better job, while integratively motivated learners want to learn the language so that they can get to know its people and culture. Naturally, it is possible to be both instrumentally and integratively motivated, as in the case of physicians who seek to work with Spanish-speaking communities. Although it was previously thought that integratively motivated learners would be more successful than instrumentally motivated ones, most scholars now think that the degree of motivation is more important than the type of motivation.

After Gardner and Lambert’s original formulations (1972), Graham (1984) identified a third type of language learning motivation called **assimilative motivation.** Assimilative motivation goes beyond integrative motivation and refers to a desire to actually join the new culture. When teachers hope that school-age learners will want to become part of their peer group at school, they are hoping that their students will be assimilatively motivated. Assimilative motivation does not require learners to cut ties completely with their first language group, but they must desire to become functioning members of the new group. Thus, by its very definition, assimilative motivation is a particularly strong type of motivation.

Closely tied to the issue of motivation is the issue of learner attitudes toward the new language and culture. It is unfortunately true that many people have prejudices toward members of other groups, and it is almost trivial to say that people with negative attitudes toward a particular group, would be unlikely to learn that group’s language successfully. Attitudes toward particular groups typically have a sociological basis, and most scholars believe that the attitudes and motivation of individual language learners or groups of learners cannot be understood outside of the particular social and political context where the language learning is taking place. Gardner (1985) reminds us that the learning environment has a strong influence on the actual attitudes and motivations that learners hold. In some learning situations, extreme motivation is required if the learner is going to achieve any
ability in the new language. Many Americans interested in learning Swahili would not find classes readily available, while in many parts of the world, it is almost impossible to avoid English instruction.

While Gardner’s social-psychological approach to motivation in second language learning has been very useful in understanding learners’ perspectives on the target language and target culture, a number of scholars have called for language educators to think more broadly about motivation and to consider the ways motivation is more typically conceptualized in psychology and education. These theories recognize many learner-based and environmental influences on motivation beyond feelings about the particular language and culture. The concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are central to many motivational theories, and although instrumental and integrative motivation would seem to be related to the more general concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the two approaches to motivation are clearly not identical. In addition, most recently, language educators have emphasized the importance of fostering learner autonomy in the development of language learning motivation. Learners who have more control of their learning goals and procedures are more likely to develop and maintain their individual language learning motivation. Language learning self-access centers are based on the premise that people who have control over their language learning are more effective.

Encouraging Positive Attitudes and Motivation. Students will generally have some combination of instrumental, integrative, and possibly assimilative motivation as well as their own personal motivations for language learning. English learners in the United States are likely to have a particularly strong mix of motivations resulting from parental and peer pressure, the school environment, and their relationships with teachers. In order to understand students’ motivations, it is necessary to consider the social and political circumstances surrounding their language learning. Spanish-speaking learners in the United States, for example, may be told that speaking English is the key to college and a successful career, but if they live in an entirely Spanish-speaking community, they will be less likely to recognize the instrumental value of learning English. By the same token, foreign language learners in the United States are often told of the usefulness of learning a second language for career purposes, but few career paths in the United States are actually closed to monolinguals. Because of the strong societal forces involved, simply listing the advantages of language learning is not usually effective in changing students’ attitudes and motivations toward language learning. Here are some more specific suggestions:

- Help students develop personal goals for language learning. Some students may not identify with the idea of going to college in the future, but want to participate in a school activity. World language students who are taking a language because of an academic requirement need help developing intrinsic reasons for learning the language.
- Discuss students’ ideas about the language and culture. ELs are particularly vulnerable to developing stereotypes whenever they or someone they know has a negative interaction with English speakers.
- Help students make connections with members of the new community. Language buddies, field trips, and Twitter or Facebook exchanges are good ways
to put students in contact with the new culture (with appropriate supervision, of course!).

- Give learners support before and after cultural contacts. Have students discuss their expectations, how to develop relationships with native speakers, and their previous cultural experiences. Help students better understand their experiences to avoid the development of new stereotypes.
- Support autonomy by giving learners choices in materials, learning modalities, and activities.

**Anxiety.** A number of studies have shown that learning and using a second language can make some people feel anxious. When our clothes or hairstyle are wrong, we worry that other people will perceive us as less stylish, intelligent, or “cool” than we really are. Similarly, language learners are often unable to display many of the personality traits that are important to their self-image. Kind people are unable to display their warmth and concern, funny people are unable to make jokes, and so forth. While *most* people accept these limitations as a natural consequence of being a learner, some language learners become anxious when they cannot “be themselves” when speaking in the new language. Listening can also make learners feel anxious. Some students think that they are supposed to understand everything and feel anxious whenever they miss a word. Although anxiety is usually associated with listening and speaking, studies have also found that some students feel anxious when they have to read or write the second language.

Students who have to function in the second culture may feel even more anxious. Adolescents are commonly worried about looking silly in front of their peers, and a new culture has different requirements for acting appropriately. Second language learners who must speak English in front of peers from their native culture group often feel that they are in a particularly uncomfortable situation. If they sound “American” enough to be accepted by English speakers, they might be perceived as disloyal by their native group.

Surveys have shown that many students (around one-third) feel moderately to strongly anxious about language learning, and a number of studies have found that students with higher levels of anxiety tend to do more poorly in their language classes. Interestingly, some cultural groups may have higher numbers of anxious learners than others. Korean learners of English seem to be somewhat more anxious than American foreign language learners, but Turkish- and Spanish-speaking English learners have been found to be somewhat less anxious than some other groups. However, Mejias, Applbaum, Applbaum, and Trotter (1991) studied bilingual Hispanic high school and college students, in the United States and found that these students felt uncomfortable when speaking *either* English or Spanish. The authors even speculated that anxiety contributes to high Hispanic drop-out rates.

MacIntyre (1991) suggests a different way to think about foreign language anxiety: he focuses on why or why not students choose to communicate in their new language when they have the opportunity. This idea called **willingness to communicate** (WTC) reminds language teachers that anxiety and motivation should be considered together. Perhaps not surprisingly, studies have found a strong relationship between WTC and foreign language anxiety; students with higher levels
Second language learners can be vulnerable to a particular type of anxiety called **culture shock**. Even students who do not have personal contact with members of the new culture can experience culture shock by watching TV or by hearing about difficulties that friends or family members have experienced. Culture shock refers to anxiety reactions resulting from difficulties people have when they have to function within the norms and requirements of a new culture. It occurs when people realize that their usual expectations of how things work and how people should act are not the same in the new culture. Ordinary behaviors such as greeting people, getting on a bus, or making a simple purchase are often difficult in the new culture, and simple misunderstandings can quickly lead to frustration and even anger. Although school-age children may not express their feelings, they may be the most susceptible to culture shock since they may spend many more hours each day dealing with the new culture than adults who have jobs that require little contact with English speakers.

**Reducing Anxiety.** Anxiety can be an important problem in language learning. As Mejias and his colleagues (1991) showed, in addition to making students feel uncomfortable, anxiety can have a negative impact on their academic success and career goals. While there is no way to eliminate anxiety entirely, there are several things that teachers can do to help their students feel more comfortable using the new language. Teacher support and understanding are particularly important. Pappamihiel (2002) found that middle school learners were more comfortable speaking English in their new language.
ESL classes than in their mainstream content classes, suggesting that teachers may help reduce anxiety by creating a supportive classroom environment. The following approaches can also be used to help language learners feel less anxious in either their language or mainstream content classes:

- Acknowledge students’ discomfort. Many students are relieved to learn that they are not the only ones experiencing anxiety.
- Acknowledge students’ feelings of culture shock and offer opportunities for students to talk about their experiences.
- Use the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (found in Appendix B) to help identify anxious learners and to start a discussion about anxiety.
- Help students develop more realistic expectations for language learning.
- Arrange contacts with more advanced students so that students see that people like them can learn the language.
- Correct errors gently.
- Use humor and games to distract attention away from individual speakers.
- Use small-group and pair activities rather than whole-class activities.
- Have students imagine becoming anxious while speaking and overcoming that anxiety.

Cognitive Factors: Language Aptitude, Learning Styles, and Stages of Cognitive Development

**Language Aptitude.** Several tests of cognitive abilities have been developed that attempt to identify people who are likely to be successful language learners. The best-known of these tests is the *Modern Language Aptitude Test* (Carroll & Sapon, 1959), which examines learners in the areas of sound-symbol association, grammatical sensitivity, and the ability to memorize new vocabulary words. **Language aptitude tests** were first developed by the American military to identify personnel who would be able to develop new language skills and put them to use quickly. Aptitude tests have actually had limited success in identifying successful language learners in typical classroom situations, and today, most scholars have concluded that people with normal intelligence are capable of learning a second language, (and some scholars even reject that limitation). With the exception of the military and other specialized institutions, language aptitude tests are no longer commonly used except by second language acquisition researchers interested in understanding variation in second language achievement. Researchers interested in cognitive differences among language learners have turned their attention from language aptitude to learning styles, since language teachers must teach all their students and not just those who score well on language aptitude tests. Importantly, learning styles offer teachers the possibility of tailoring instruction to the learning strengths of different types of language learners.

**Learning Styles.** Learning styles are persistent and instinctive ways that individuals process information when faced with a learning situation. The
simplest example of a learning style is **sensory mode preference**. Some people are naturally visual learners while others are naturally auditory, tactile, or kinesthetic learners. Of course many people use a combination of sensory modalities. Even though it can be difficult to provide different instruction for a variety of learning preferences, an understanding of learning styles helps teachers recognize their students’ learning strengths and difficulties. Visual learners, for example, are likely to have more difficulty listening than auditory learners.

The most widely studied learning style difference associated with language learning is called **field dependence–field independence (FD–FI)**. (You may have already encountered FD–FI because it has been studied with respect to a great many types of learning.) FD–FI can be complicated to describe, but it may be thought of as asking whether learners tend to be influenced by the big picture or overall setting (called a field) or whether they are able to ignore the overall field and focus in on details. To adapt the old adage, field independent learners are better able to see the trees within the forest, while field dependent learners are better able to see the forest but not the individual trees. More field independent learners are better able to find hidden pictures disguised within a larger picture, such as those that appear in the magazine *Highlights for Children*. Of course, FD–FI is not an all or nothing proposition, but rather a continuum where some learners tend to the more field dependent (FD) side and others to the more field independent (FI) end. It is also important to point out that many educators object to the term **field dependence** since dependence often has a negative connotation in American culture. They prefer the term **field sensitivity** since FD learners have a number of positive attributes that stem from their ability to take in the whole field simultaneously.

**VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM**

“If the teacher would only let me see what she is saying, I would understand.”
A number of abilities have been associated with both FD and FI learners. FI learners are analytic and good at focusing in on details. Engineers tend to be more field independent. In contrast, more FD individuals are good at holistic tasks and seem to be particularly suited to “people” professions where perceiving interpersonal cues is important. From this description, it is natural to think that more FD people would be better language learners, but in fact, many studies have found that FI learners are the more successful language learners. This finding has been frustrating to many language teachers who feel intuitively that the ability to discern interpersonal cues should be a great advantage in learning to communicate effectively in a second language. Although scholars have not yet resolved this seeming contradiction, it is possible that the grammar focus and traditional language tests in many language classes favor the abilities associated with more FI learners. In addition, a number of scholars have suggested that Western schooling in general tends to be designed for FI learners.

Helping Students with Different Learning Styles. Different learning styles would seem to imply that teachers should differentiate instruction based on students’ individual styles. While this is an admirable goal, it is very hard to individualize instruction for every learning style in most language classes. In addition, second language acquisition research tells us that some language learning experiences are essential even if they clash with the learner’s preferred style; for example, learners must listen to the language even if they are visual learners. Here are a few suggestions for helping students with different learning styles:

- Be aware of learning style differences and pay close attention when using an activity that is likely to be difficult for a particular type of learner. Visual learners may have difficulty with listening activities, for example, and field sensitive (dependent) learners will likely have difficulty focusing on grammatical concepts.
- Modify activities to make them more accessible to a wider range of learners. For example, listening activities could include written scripts.
- Include a variety of activity types that are appropriate for a range of learning styles. If you vary the activity type during your lessons, you will automatically include a wider range of learners.
- Change your teaching approach whenever you reteach material, since some students may not have understood a lesson the first time due to learning style conflicts. By changing your teaching approach, you give students a chance to learn in a different way.
- Pay close attention to learning styles when you work with individual students. You could vary the order of examples and generalizations, write your examples down, ask the student to listen, or have him or her act out new words. Over time, you will come to know which approaches work best with each of your students.
Metacognitive Factors: Beliefs About Language Learning and Language Learning Strategies

Educators have been concerned for a long time about the emotional and cognitive characteristics of learners, but recently they have begun to discuss the metacognitive aspects of learning. Metacognition refers to how and what learners think about the learning process. It is thinking about learning. Metacognitive factors describe differences in the ways learners approach language learning and include their beliefs, learning strategies, and any other “thinking” that they do about language learning.

Beliefs About Language Learning. Although methods books, like this one, are designed to give language teachers an accurate and up-to-date understanding of second language acquisition, it is important to recognize that teachers are not the only ones with ideas about how languages are learned and how they should be taught. Language learners also have many beliefs about important issues in second language acquisition, such as how languages should be studied, how difficult it is to learn particular languages, who has language aptitude, and what makes a good language teacher! Some learner beliefs may be helpful while others can be counterproductive to language learning. In a study of beginning university language learners in the United States, for example, I found that over a third of the students thought that a language could be learned in two years or less by studying only one hour a day. Substantial numbers of students also believed that learning a second language primarily involved learning vocabulary words or grammatical rules (positions which will contrast strongly with the theories of second language acquisition described in the next chapter). Some American high school students I studied even believed that speakers of all languages across the world first formulated their thoughts in English and then translated their ideas into the particular language that was spoken in their countries. Besides showing great ethnocentrism, the students who believed that people of all other language groups first “thought” in English did not even consider that as language learners they were supposed to learn how to “think” in their new language, not merely to translate.

Misconceptions like these can lead to a number of important problems for language learners and their teachers. First of all, students tend to choose learning strategies (to be discussed in the next section) that are consistent with their beliefs about language learning. So learners who believe that language learning is synonymous with vocabulary learning are likely to spend their time memorizing words. Learners with unrealistic beliefs about language learning have also been found to be more anxious than other learners. Misconceptions about language learning become even more important when students are encouraged to become more autonomous and take greater responsibility for their own language learning.

Helping Students Develop a Realistic Understanding of Language Learning. People are often surprised to learn that common beliefs about language learning they take for granted are actually the subject of lively debate among language teachers and
scholars. The following are some suggestions for helping students develop more realistic expectations for language learning:

- Talk with your students about the process of language learning.
- Make discussions about language learning an important part of your classes. When looking for interesting discussion topics, language teachers often overlook the one topic that is relevant to everyone in the class: learning the new language!
- Determine your students’ beliefs in order to explain the purpose of classroom activities more effectively.
- Use the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) found in Appendix A to better understand your own and your students’ beliefs and to encourage discussions about language learning.

**Language Learning Strategies.** Language learning strategies (LLS) are specific steps that learners take to increase their language learning. Although LLS are often associated with particular techniques or even tricks that learners use, such as flashcards or mnemonic devices, the term refers to a wide range of things that learners do to help themselves learn the language. Finding a quiet place to study, calming yourself when anxious, practicing how to order in a restaurant, or seeking out a conversational partner all fall under the heading of LLS. Some scholars believe that successful and less successful language learners use different strategies, and that less successful learners would benefit from learning the strategies of more successful students. Other scholars take a learning style approach, suggesting that teachers make students aware of a range of learning strategies and help them select the strategies that are most compatible with their learning styles. Many scholars emphasize strategic learning over the use of specific learning strategies. In strategic learning, the emphasis is on considering the specific learning task and developing approaches that are particularly suited to that task. Strategic learning involves analyzing the task, analyzing oneself as a learner, considering the resources that are available, and analyzing the learning situation. Strategic learning stresses flexibility and appropriateness in strategy use.

The well-known strategy researcher Rebecca Oxford (1990) differentiates direct and indirect LLS. Direct strategies involve actually using the language and include memory strategies (i.e., word associations and use of imagery), cognitive strategies (i.e., practicing and analyzing), and compensation strategies (i.e., guessing words and directing the conversation to a familiar topic). Indirect strategies support language learning without using the language directly. These include metacognitive strategies which help learners organize and plan their learning, affective strategies which help learners manage language learning emotions, and social strategies which involve interaction with other people. A number of specific strategies connected to various aspects of language learning, such as listening, reading, and learning vocabulary words, have also been identified (these strategies will be described in Chapters 4 through 8). The first graders in the following examples are using a number of different LLS. Decide which of the strategies are direct and which are indirect.
Ms. Kelley observes her first graders using a number of language learning strategies. Classify each of the strategies as either direct or indirect and give a reason for your choice. Some of the strategies will have components of both types of strategies. The first answer is already filled in.

Reynaldo is in the cafeteria listening to another child getting lunch. **Direct Strategy.** Reynaldo is listening to language. Reynaldo’s approach also has elements of indirect strategies because it involves another person (social strategy) and possibly involves planning (metacognitive strategy) since Reynaldo may be listening to the other child order lunch so he can do the same thing when it is his turn.

David has made piles of English and Spanish books on his desk. He announces to Ms. Kelley that he is going to read an English book every time he finishes a Spanish book.

Using self-invented spelling, Sonia writes the new English words she hears in a pretty flowered notebook. She usually draws a picture next to each word.

**Communication strategies** are closely related to the “compensation” category of Oxford’s direct strategies since they can be used to compensate for weaknesses in a learner’s speaking ability. Communication strategies are the steps learners take to be as successful as possible when communicating in the new language. Teachers often remark that sometimes students with less language ability are better than others at achieving their communicative goals because they use their language skills to full advantage. Communication strategies include actions such as asking a conversational partner to repeat or talk more slowly, using gestures and pantomime, and repeating important words or phrases to encourage a partner to explain further.
Helping Students Develop Effective Language Learning Strategies. Many language educators believe that language teachers should not only teach the language but also teach students how to learn the language. This practice is called strategy training. Students need indirect strategies such as setting aside time every day to review or seeking out conversational opportunities as well as direct strategies for specific tasks such as reading content material or listening to a classroom lecture. Many teachers see strategy training as most successful when students are encouraged to try learning approaches that are consistent with their individual learning styles, needs, and comfort levels. Here are some specific suggestions:

- Consult with students so that they are not left on their own to choose strategies.
- Suggest appropriate strategies whenever students encounter a new type of language learning task.
- Let students select some of their own learning materials and activities to encourage them to be more autonomous.
- Involve families in strategy training. Invite students and families to meetings or to drop-in homework sessions where you answer questions and model useful strategies.

Younger Learners and Stages of Cognitive Development

The characteristics discussed so far in this chapter can be found in learners of any age, but there are some important considerations to be especially aware of when working with younger learners. In addition to their many other differences, younger learners differ from older learners in terms of their level of cognitive development. (You may be familiar with Jean Piaget’s cognitive development model.) Piaget describes a series of developmental stages that progress from babies’ first cognitive efforts to differentiate themselves from their mothers to the culminating step of developing abstract reasoning abilities. Interestingly, the age associated with the development of abstract reasoning abilities, called the onset of formal operations in Piaget’s theory, coincides with early adolescence, exactly the time that some researchers have associated with a loss of language learning ability. (This issue will be discussed further in Chapter 2.)

The achievement of formal operations is probably an important milestone in how people approach language learning. Since grammatical explanations are necessarily abstract, abstract reasoning ability is required for learners to be able to understand and manipulate grammatical rules. While there is great controversy over the usefulness of grammatical explanations and exercises with older learners, such practices are inappropriate for younger learners, at least those under the age of 11 or 12, since they will not have achieved the necessary level of cognitive development to be able to think about grammar abstractly. It is also important to note that not everyone reaches Piaget’s highest level of cognitive development and that the achievement of formal operations is associated with formal schooling. It is possible, therefore, that older learners who have had irregular school attendance, such as refugees or migrant workers, may be similar to younger learners in their lack of readiness for abstract grammatical explanations.
Several scholars believe that the ability to use abstract grammatical rules accounts for the fact that adult language learners tend to make quicker early progress in learning a second language than children do. On the other hand, some speculate that the use of grammatical rules can actually impede language learning. Think of grammatical knowledge as a kind of filter between the learner and the language itself. Instead of absorbing language directly through listening or reading, learners analyze and categorize what they hear, looking for rules and contrasts and similarities with their first language. While this strategy can be useful at early stages of learning, ultimately, learners have to create and process language from an automatic, internalized system and not from the manipulation of explicit grammatical rules.

**VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM**

This true incident is from my own teaching. I had a second-year French class of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds that used a very grammar-heavy syllabus. (I did not design the syllabus!) One student in the class was never able to follow the grammatical explanations, even when I explained the concepts in English as simply as I could, so I would always give her grammatical charts to memorize. Her other teachers also complained that she had great difficulty with tasks that involved analysis and generalization. Several months into the school year, the student arrived to my class noticeably angry:

**Student:** Mrs. Horwitz, I’m so mad at you. You know that new verb you made me memorize last night? Well, it works like all these other verbs (she pointed to a section in her book). And you see these pronouns; well, these are like these other ones, and these ones all work the same! You’ve been making me memorize all this stuff when you could have just told me the rules!

**Me:** I’m so sorry, Esmerelda (this is a made-up name, of course), I promise that I will give you the explanations from now on.

Soon, her other teachers reported similar breakthroughs. We were all relieved; we believed that Esmerelda had achieved formal operations and that it would now be easier to teach her. And it was!

- **Why do you think it was now easier to teach Esmerelda? Instead of waiting for her to reach formal operations, what else could I have done to help her learn French?**

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Identity and Language Learning

As humans mature, we develop in many ways, and many of these changes have implications for second language acquisition. As noted above, as learners progress in their cognitive development, they will have the possibility of approaching language learning in more analytic ways. A number of other psychological and social changes across the human lifespan also have important implications for language learning. (The role of social factors in SLA will be discussed further in Chapter 3.) Norton (2000) defines identity as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world because of power relations, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how that person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 5). Learning a new language—and especially living in a new culture—can challenge our sense of our place in the world, of who we are, and of who we can be. Adolescent and adult students come to language learning with an already developed or at least developing sense of identity, and they can feel uncomfortable when interacting with people in the second language community because they do not receive the same type of responses they have come to expect in their first language. Norton rightly points out that developing language and cultural competence is not an abstract undertaking; language learners who have moved to another country are faced with creating a new life for themselves. Adult learners who have achieved some degree of status in their first language community become “learners” in the new culture and may even be treated as childlike or unintelligent. The new culture defines second language learners in many ways, and learners have little ability to control how they are perceived in the new environment. Norton’s conceptualization of the roles of identity and power relationships in language learning reminds language teachers that learners are not simply composites of the characteristics described in this chapter and that language learning does not take place in a vacuum. We must always remember that our students are human beings with unique sets of life and language learning experiences and that language learning contexts are not neutral. Ultimately, neither second language learners nor second language learning can be understood outside the social context where the learning takes place.

FINDING YOUR WAY

REFLECTIONS

Which learner characteristics do you think are most important in successful second language learning? Do you think that different characteristics are helpful in different language learning settings?
Is it possible to meet the needs of different types of learners in the same class?

PLANNING FOR YOUR CLASSES

How can you encourage your students’ motivation for language learning?

In what ways do you think your students’ beliefs about language learning will be compatible or incompatible with your own ideas about language teaching?

PROJECTS

- Complete the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) in Appendix A and compare your answers with another person. What are your major areas of agreement and disagreement? What kinds of language learning beliefs do you think your students will have? Do you think they will have beliefs that could get in the way of their language learning?
- Find out the kinds of programs that your school district uses for ELs and world languages students. Are there different kinds of programs for ELs of different ages? At what age does instruction in world languages begin? Which world languages are taught in the school district? Does the district have dual-language programs?
- Interview a person who is trying to learn a language. What is his or her motivation for language learning? Is he or she anxious about it? What learning strategies does he or she use? (Ask about language learning tricks or how he or she studies, if your learner does not understand the idea of learning strategies.) Does your learner have any ideas about his or her learning style? What does your learner find relatively easy and difficult about language learning? If you were this person’s language teacher, what
recommendations would you make for this person’s language learning. Make specific recommendations based on the person’s individual characteristics (motivation, learning style, etc.), not general recommendations that would be good for anyone.

IN YOUR JOURNAL

■ What kind(s) of learning style(s) do you think you have? How has your learning style(s) helped or hindered you as a learner?
■ Do you have any special language learning strategies?
■ Were you or are you an anxious language learner? Teachers often do not realize that language anxiety is not limited to students. Several studies have found that some nonnative teachers are uncomfortable speaking in front of students and avoid classroom activities that require spontaneous speech. If you think you might be an anxious language teacher, you might want to read Horwitz (1996), “Even teachers get the blues: Recognizing and alleviating non-native teachers’ feelings of foreign language anxiety”, and complete the Teacher Foreign Language Anxiety Scale in Appendix C. Try to think about some things you can do to reduce your anxiety.
■ Do you feel that you are the same person in all of the languages you speak? When you speak your second language, do you feel that people react to you in the same way that they do when you speak your first language? What accommodations do you have to make to function in the second culture?

TEACHING CHECKLIST

Yes  No
☐ ☐ I talk to my students about their language learning goals.
☐ ☐ I encourage my students to see the new culture positively.
☐ ☐ I acknowledge and attempt to reduce my students’ anxiety.
☐ ☐ I talk to my students about how to approach language learning.
☐ ☐ I incorporate strategy training within my lessons.
☐ ☐ I keep my students’ learning styles in mind.
☐ ☐ I do not use abstract grammatical explanations with younger learners.
☐ ☐ I think about the opportunities and disadvantages that my teaching setting has for my students.
☐ ☐ I encourage my students’ learner autonomy.
☐ ☐ I talk with my students about their feelings and thoughts about language learning.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


*Publications by Philip Redwine Donley, my original collaborator on this book.*