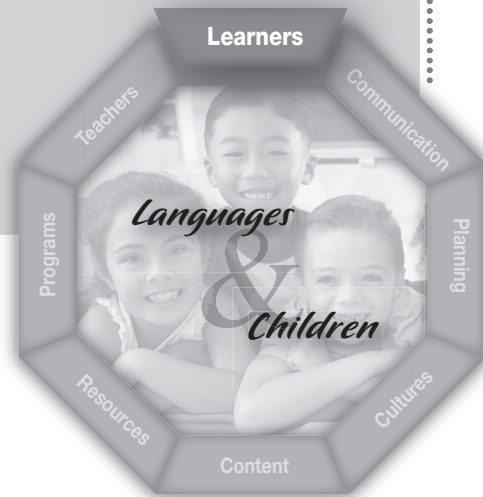


Chapter 1

Characteristics of Young Learners



Enduring Understanding

- Successful teachers take into account student differences in developmental levels and individual characteristics.

Essential Question

- What do I need to know about the students I teach?

Children have a reputation for being natural language learners, for very good reason. Almost without exception, they have learned their native language with apparent ease, and by the time they are 6 years old they have brought it to a level of fluency that is the envy of non-native speakers. Parents who bring their children into a second-language setting and immerse them in a new situation—for example, an elementary school taught in the foreign language—often experience a kind of miracle. After around 6 months, their child begins to function successfully in the new setting and at a linguistic level to which the parents cannot hope to aspire, even when they have been studying the language seriously for a similar period of time.

These examples of children's natural language learning ability might seem to suggest that the best thing to do to help a child learn a language is simply to place the child in the target language setting and then stay out of the way to let the miracle happen. Unfortunately, this is not an approach that will make it possible to bring languages to every child. There is, however, both linguistic and psychological theory to help explain children's seemingly effortless second-language acquisition and to provide insights that

can make the classroom a better place for such language acquisition to take place. Understanding this theory, showing consideration of learner differences, and understanding the principles of child development and the characteristics of children at different stages of development will help prepare the teacher to create curriculum and activities that bring languages and children together effectively.

● Second-Language Acquisition

Second-language acquisition theory may help explain the puzzling situation of children who acquire languages more quickly and apparently with much less effort than do their parents when placed in a second-language environment. The children are in a setting in which they are surrounded by language that is made meaningful because of the context and because of the way teachers speak to them. They are given time to sort out the language that they hear and understand, until they are ready to begin to use it for their own expressive purposes. Their parents, on the other hand, are usually busy learning vocabulary and grammar rules, and they attempt to apply them later to a setting in which they have something to say. For Stephen Krashen, a linguist who has synthesized much of recent second-language acquisition research in his writing, the children would be *acquiring* language, while the parents would be *learning* it.

Krashen has popularized the idea of comprehensible input, the amount or level of language that the student can fully understand, plus just a little more: $i + 1$. According to Krashen's input hypothesis, the most important factor in the amount of language acquired by a learner is the amount of comprehensible input to which that learner is exposed.

The input hypothesis provides a powerful reason for the exclusive use of the target language for all classroom purposes. However, simply deciding to use the target language is not enough. It must be used in such a way that the message is understood by the student at all times, even though every word of the message may not be familiar. This is accomplished through the use of gestures, examples, illustrations, experiences, and caretaker speech, as described next. When teachers complain that students do not understand them when they use the target language, it may well be because they are using the target language at a level that is too far beyond the child's current ability to understand—actually $i + 10$ or perhaps $i + 50$. Learners who are presented with language too far beyond their current level may well conclude that they are not good language learners and/or that this language is simply too hard to be learned. An important part of the teacher's planning time for a classroom based on the principles of second-language acquisition will be devoted to strategies for making the target language comprehensible to the students.

Paying attention to input focuses on the importance of listening skills and on the potential benefits that can come from increased listening opportunities for all students, especially those at the beginning level. An extended listening period gives learners the opportunity to gather meanings and associate them with language. They can give their full attention to understanding the messages that are being communicated, without the pressure to imitate or respond immediately.

Use of Language—Caretaker Speech

In a classroom designed to encourage second-language acquisition, there is an emphasis on communication. The teacher provides students with an environment in which they are surrounded by messages in the target language that communicate interesting, relevant information in language they are able to understand—language that is comprehensible to them. The teacher uses natural language, not contrived language intended to incorporate all the most recently learned grammar points. It differs from the language used with peers. Part of creating comprehensible input for language acquirers consists of using strategies for making the message understood, variously known as “motherese,” “caretaker speech,” “teacherese,” or “foreigner talk.” Some of the characteristics of this speech, as it occurs naturally, will be observed when a grandparent is talking with a young grandchild—or when a skilled teacher is introducing a new language. Here are some features of this kind of speech:

1. A somewhat slower rate of speech (still with the normal rate of speech for that speaker, but at the lower end of the range).
2. More distinct pronunciation (not a distorted pronunciation, however, which actually changes the sounds of the language). For example, most American speakers of English pronounce the “t” in the word *letter* as if it were spelled “dd.” When asked to pronounce clearly, they often change their pronunciation of the sound to “tt,” thus distorting the language through an attempt to pronounce it “accurately.” Such distortions are not in the long-range best interests of the learner.
3. Shorter, less complex sentences.
4. More rephrasing and repetition.
5. More frequent meaning checks with the listener to make sure that he or she understands.
6. Use of gesture and visual reinforcement.
7. Greater use of concrete referents.
8. Scaffolding. The teacher surrounds the learner with language, allowing the student to be a participant in dialogue. In early language acquisition, the teacher actually provides both verbal parts of a conversation. Later, the teacher might embellish one- and two-word responses by the learner into complete utterances in a natural, conversational manner, at the same time modeling extended discourse and providing meaningful listening experiences. Students will become capable of taking over increasing responsibility as participants in the conversation.

Conditions Necessary for Second-Language Acquisition in the Classroom

According to Krashen and colleagues (1982), as well as other researchers, language acquisition takes place most effectively when the input is meaningful and interesting to the learner, when it is comprehensible ($i + 1$), and when it is not grammatically sequenced.

These ideas contrast sharply with some practices that have been common in language teaching. Language acquisition theory suggests that the language to which learners are exposed should be as natural as possible—that the past tense, for example, should not be postponed until students are able to analyze the past tense themselves. The key factor in the usefulness of input is whether or not it is comprehended.

In general, the grammatical details of a message do not have as much impact on comprehensibility as does the context surrounding the verbal message and the vocabulary with which the message is communicated, especially in the early stages of language acquisition. Meaningfulness and interest for the learner may well be the most significant factors of all.

Michael Long (1983) and others suggest that acquisition takes place best in a setting in which meaning is negotiated through interaction, so that the student has influence on the message being communicated. Of course, the greater the language skills of the listener, the more effectively the interaction can influence the message. This suggests to the teacher that early attention must focus on providing students with the ability to communicate messages such as, “I don’t understand,” “Could you please repeat that?,” “Did you mean . . .?,” “Could you please speak more slowly?,” and so forth.

Comprehensible Output

Merrill Swain (1985) has taken Krashen’s idea one step further with her suggestion that students acquire language most meaningfully when they also have the opportunity for comprehensible “output,” or “pushed output.” That is, they need to have a setting in which their attempts at communication are valued and shaped to make them acceptable and understandable, through communicative rather than grammatical means of correction. When learners are pushed to express themselves in the new language, they begin to listen to the grammar of the language, and not just to the vocabulary. Output also allows learners to test hypotheses about the target language grammar (Ellis, 2008).

Mounting evidence suggests that direct error correction has little or no influence on the accuracy of messages (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982). Correction that responds to the meaning of a message, however, has a much greater likelihood of making a difference for the speaker. Frequently correcting grammatical errors and interrupting to prod for accuracy tends to shift students’ attention away from the message being communicated and toward inhibiting their willingness to speak.

Essential Concepts of Second Language Acquisition for Teachers

Awareness of how languages are learned is a part of the essential background of any language teacher, and this is especially the case at the K–8 level. A group of K–6 foreign language teachers and teacher trainers developed the following list of essential concepts of second-language (L2) acquisition for early language teachers. They were part of a Teacher Partnership Institute at the National K–12 Foreign Language Resource Center at Iowa State University. The following list grew out of their experiences and discussion:

- Second-language acquisition proceeds according to predictable stages.
- The degree of acquisition is correlated with the time available for instruction.
- Children acquire language best in a low-anxiety environment.
- Culture is closely related to language and is an essential component of instruction.
- Meaning can be communicated in L2 without the use of English (or L1).
- Children acquire language through a focus on meaning rather than on grammar.
- Children involve many senses in the acquisition process.
- Meaning in L2 is established, in a school setting, through thematic, integrative approaches incorporating the content of the general curriculum.
- Meaning is established through visual cues.
- Children acquire language through extended listening experiences and negotiation of meaning.
- A relevant, meaningful context is necessary for effective language acquisition.
- The teacher can use a variety of techniques to make the language understandable to children (comprehensible input).
- Children acquire language through the tasks appropriate to their developmental level:
 - a. More manipulation is necessary for younger students.
 - b. Language analysis begins later (philosophic layer/late adolescence).
 - c. Older students often demand more translations.
- The rate and the degree of L2 acquisition are affected by differing student learning styles.
- Learner-centered instruction facilitates second-language acquisition.

This is a concise summary of our current understanding of effective foreign language pedagogy for young learners.

Factors Affecting Second-Language Acquisition

Many factors are at work in the early language classroom. There is variation among the characteristics of the input to which students are or have been exposed, as well as factors relating to individual students.

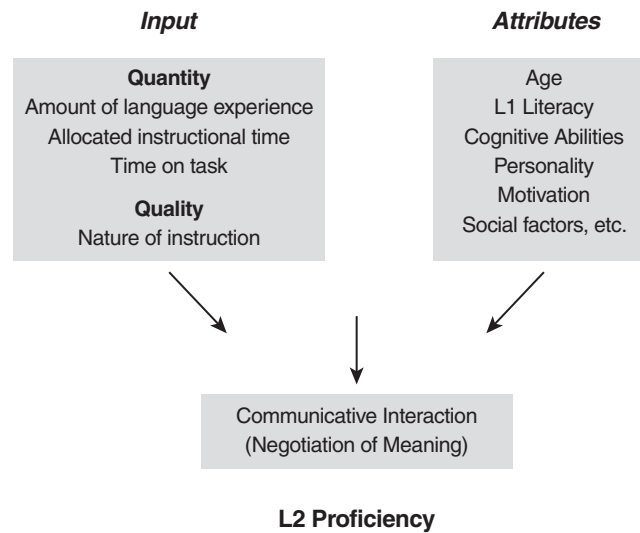
Some of the most important of these issues are summarized in Figure 1.1. The input factors in this diagram work together to create an environment and a learning career for the student that can lead to eventual fluency in the target language.

How long has the child been learning the language? The amount of language to which the student has already been exposed is a critical element in his or her current and future levels of language acquisition. Time is the great ally in development of language proficiency.

6 *part one* • The Learner

● **FIGURE 1.1** Input and Attributes in L2 Acquisition

Source: Adapted from Brown (1991).



Does the program offer language every day for at least 30 to 40 minutes, for optimal learning in a program for young learners, or is there less time available? Met and Rhodes (1990) identified time spent in language instruction and the intensity of that instruction as the two most critical factors in rate and amount of language acquisition. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Young Learner Task Force (Swender and Duncan, 1998) established 30 to 40 minutes per day, three to five days per week, as a minimum time allocation for achievement of the performance goals outlined for K–12 learners (p. 482).

Within the amount of time that is allocated to language in the school day, how much of that time is actually spent on language instruction? How often is the class canceled because of school programs or field trips? How much time is spent moving the students to the language classroom, or taking out and putting away materials, or handling discipline problems? All of these factors cut into allocated time; time on task is the real measure of the input available during a class period.

In addition to how much time is spent, we also have to look at the quality of that time. What kind of instruction is taking place? Is there use of the target language 95 percent of the time in cognitively engaging, developmentally appropriate activities?

On the other side of the chart are the attributes that the student brings to the language learning process. These are the factors within the student and the student's social setting.

First, how old is the learner? Age is strongly related to learning another language. Children are more likely to develop native-like proficiency before age 10, and they are also

at a maximum of openness to other cultures. Second, how literate are the learners in their first language? These skills will influence the ability of the learner to benefit from written forms of input.

In the model (Figure 1.1) there is interaction between the two sides. The best input can also fail a student if it does not take into account the attributes of the individual learner. Every learner brings significant cognitive abilities to the classroom. These are related to the student's capacity for analogy and intellectualization. Each learner has a unique array of abilities and capacities, of intelligences, and of learning styles and strategies. All of these dimensions affect the types of experiences that will best facilitate language acquisition for a specific learner, no matter what the learner's age.

What factors in a student's personality will affect her or his ability to profit from target language input? Is the student a risk taker or an extrovert? Is the learner inhibited? What other personality factors might support or hinder language learning?

How strong is the student's motivation to learn the language? Highly motivated students seek out input and benefit from every opportunity to experience the new language.

What is the child's social environment? Is language learning valued at home and among peers? What is the learner's attitude about speakers of the new language?

Once the input and attributes have been taken into account, the next step is interaction. The learner must have the opportunity to use the language, to engage with the language, and to construct meaning with the language in order to learn it! With enough opportunities for communicative interaction, the final stage is, of course, proficiency in the new language.

● Cognitive Characteristics of the Learner

Just as second-language acquisition research has helped us better understand the language development of the students in our classrooms, cognitive psychologists have given us information about learning in general. Information about the brain can lead us to better ways to reach our students, and to make our time with them more effective. Multiple intelligences and learning styles models have been developed by psychologists and educators in order to assist the teacher in planning for a whole classroom of learners whose learning preferences and strengths may be different from those of the teacher—and they are certainly not identical with those of each other!

Information from Brain Research

The study of the brain and intensive work in cognitive psychology have resulted in a significant shift in orientation away from the behaviorist principles that once dominated educational thought and practice. Rote learning, habit formation, and observable outcomes are being replaced by an emphasis on meaningfulness, metacognition, and process.

8 *part one* • The Learner

For the behavioral psychologist, the student is considered to be a relatively passive subject, to be manipulated through reinforcement techniques and drill. The cognitive psychologist, by contrast, sees students as active participants in the learning situation, controlling and shaping their own learning processes. In the behaviorist classroom, the students respond to stimuli and reinforcement, whereas in the classroom based on cognitive psychology, the students' own internal motivation drives the learning process. One of the most important principles of cognitive psychology for the early language teacher is that information is best learned and retained if it is made meaningful to students.

Teresa Kennedy (2006, p. 479) identifies several implications of brain research for the language teacher, highlighting the importance of engaging many senses and an enriched environment. She also notes:

- We use our *emotions* to tell us what is important to learn and what to remember.
- The brain stores information based on *functionality* and *meaningfulness*.
- Emotions drive *attention*.
- Attention drives *learning* and *memory*.
- *Repetition* is necessary but it requires *novelty* with regard to instructional design (which should incorporate all five language processes—observation, listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and utilize a variety of methods and approaches).

Renate Caine and Geoffrey Caine (1997), in their *Brain/Mind Learning Principles* (pp. 104–108) point out that the search for meaning is innate. Meaningful and meaningless information are stored separately. Meaningless, or relatively unrelated, information requires far more conscious effort to learn. Meaningful information is stored in a “spatial/autobiographical” memory that does not require rehearsal and can be recalled as a complete experience.

Rod Ellis (2008) also emphasizes the significance of meaning, listing it as the second of his 10 principles of instructed second-language acquisition: “Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.” He notes that activities focused on creating meaning are intrinsically motivating for learners; they help develop both communication skills and the vocabulary and grammar needed to use the language effectively (pp. 1–2).

Patterning One of the most important points about the brain and learning is the fact that the brain's search for meaning occurs through patterning. The brain looks for patterns as it organizes information according to schematic maps and categories. As young learners in language classes search for meaning in the experiences we provide for them, we must be sure to create complex, meaningful experiences from which they construct their own patterns of understanding.

What we now know about the brain suggests that it resists having meaninglessness imposed on it; facts and skills that are presented in isolation need more practice and rehearsal to be stored. For example, if we were to ask students to memorize a random series

of letters such as *fzgihrctuw dh*, students would be able to do this task, but it would require great effort since the series of letters is presented in isolation and is meaningless.

If we were to ask students to memorize a series of letters that are put together into words such as *yet, paper, snow, drive, boat, when, through*, the task would be somewhat easier, since the brain can attach some meaning to the words even though the words themselves are not connected in any way.

If, on the other hand, the teacher uses a meaningful sentence such as *The boy is going to Disneyland when school is over for the summer*, the brain has much more of an opportunity to attach meaning and make connections. This last series of letters combined together into a sentence expresses a complete thought.

A child presented with this sentence may think of his or her favorite Disney character or some of the pictures she or he has seen of the exciting events at Disneyland. This sentence has a much better chance of being remembered because it connects to an experience that is already in the child's brain and it activates the child's prior knowledge. If the sentence is actually the climax of an engaging and emotion-filled story, it is likely that the whole experience will be stored in memory quite easily.

Although it may seem to teachers that they are making things easier for learners by reducing learning to isolated "simple" words and sounds, such as letters of the alphabet or the names of various vocabulary items, it requires more work for the brain to remember these things, since it has no meaningful experience to which to attach the learning. In the example of asking the student to learn a series of isolated letters or words, the task is actually made more difficult because the student has to rely on rote memory rather than on the context and the connections that make the learning meaningful.

The brain processes parts and wholes simultaneously. While it is sometimes necessary to focus on individual pieces or discrete skills, these individual pieces or discrete skills should be presented within a rich context. Any focus on discrete items, such as individual vocabulary or writing details, for example, must be made for a clear purpose, so that the parts become building blocks for holistic learning.

Emotions Many researchers have described the importance of emotion in the learning process and in the construction of meaning. Emotions and thoughts cannot be separated, and thus emotions have a great effect on all learning. One of Caine and Caine's (1997) guiding principles states that emotions are critical to the brain's patterning (p. 105). If an event is related to positive emotions, there is a greater chance for successful patterning to take place. Jensen (2005) puts it even more forcefully: "Emotions drive attention, create meaning, and have their own memory pathways."

The role of emotions applies both to the types of experiences we provide for the students and to the classroom atmosphere we create. Many of our student activities have positive emotions associated with them, such as games, songs, rhymes, and lessons involving movement and physical activity. Creating a warm emotional climate in which children feel self-confident, free, and highly motivated is equally as important as providing activities that have emotional connections. Periodic celebrations of learning, of target culture festivals, or of individual achievements can contribute to the positive classroom atmosphere we hope to create. Mascots for the classroom can enhance the positive environment as

well, such as a frog puppet “class member” or a “target language only” bear that goes home with the children on a rotating basis.

Story is another vehicle for integrating emotion in instruction. Pink (2006) describes story as “context enriched by emotion” (p. 103). As humans, we are natural story makers, storing and retrieving our experiences as stories. Shared stories bind us to our culture and help us understand our world.

Eric Jensen (2000) points out that for many content areas a moderate level of stress optimizes learning. However, for subjects with high complexity and novelty, such as language and mathematics, students learn better with the lower stress environment just described (p. 78).

Stephen Krashen (1981), in his discussion of the “affective filter,” highlights the importance of emotions in the language learning process and the fact that children are known to resist learning when learning is unpleasant, painful, or being attempted in a punitive environment. Students’ ability to learn more readily those things they want to learn is well recognized. Krashen relates these experiences to language acquisition by describing a filter that the brain erects to block out second-language input, no matter how carefully designed that input may be. The filter goes up in the presence of anxiety or low self-confidence, or in the absence of motivation. The filter goes down, and the language input can come through, when motivation is high, when a student is self-confident, and when the learning takes place in a relatively anxiety-free environment.

Social Dimension Construction of meaning also has a social dimension, especially in a world language classroom. As Frank Smith (1994) put it, “Language is not a genetic gift. It is a social gift.” Meaning can be constructed much more readily if social interaction is an important part of the learning. One of Ellis’s principles (2008) affirms that “the opportunity to interact in the second language is central to developing second language proficiency” (p. 2). Games, role-plays, and partner and small-group activities motivate learners at the same time as they enhance learning.

The social dimension of games and classroom rituals provides another way in which the brain can attach meaning. Once the students have learned a concept, they can practice it in partners and small groups. The social relationships of partner and small group activities add to the richness of meaning-based experiences for the brain. Following are some examples of simple social activities that can be done in the classroom.

- At the beginning of class, the whole class can greet the teacher in the target language, but then the students can also greet several of their classmates in a very short, motivating, social partner activity.
- Students can practice classroom dialogues with partners, or “read” to each other a memorized story that they have written either individually or as a class activity.
- Students can do a partner weather report. After a class member has looked out the window and reported on the weather, the other students can tell their partners about the weather outside.

- Students can turn to their partners to practice or process a new phrase or a new concept. Chapter 4, on partner and group work, will provide many other examples.

Learning Styles

The individual learners in foreign language classes differ in many ways, at every level of instruction. Writers and researchers on learning styles have provided a plethora of ways to analyze and describe learner differences, and all are useful. Learners can be characterized as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners; they can also be classified as holistic or linear learners. Some researchers place learners on a continuum from concrete to abstract or from sequential to random. Perhaps the most important insight from this information is the realization that almost all students are different from their teachers, and from each other, in a large variety of ways. This section describes a few of them.

Some learners thrive in a highly social and interactive environment; others feel more comfortable and may do better when they can think and learn alone. Some learners are motivated and empowered by carefully structured, linear tasks and unvarying routines; they may find it annoying and distracting when bulletin boards or visuals are not carefully aligned and the classroom isn't neat and orderly. Other students feel suffocated by so much structure and long for the freedom to solve problems and be creative. These same students enjoy classes in which the teacher keeps them guessing and sometimes makes random leaps from one topic to another. These students don't usually mind a little clutter—it makes them feel at home!

Many students need a supportive emotional climate in which to learn, and regular assurance that they are valued as people, regardless of their performance. A few students, on the other hand, just want to be left alone to learn—on their own!

Some students need to touch, or move, in order to learn. (That's probably true of almost every primary school child.) Some students benefit most from visuals and teachers' gestures when they are learning or reviewing language; others won't feel confident of the information until they see it written out; still others, with poor vision or a brain that processes visual input poorly, don't benefit from either.

Some children learn very well just from listening attentively to what is taking place—they may remember well without ever writing things down. Still others need to take notes and rework the information several times before it is firmly anchored.

These examples just begin to describe the ways in which students differ from one another—and from their teacher!

There are many other differences, too. Does a student learn best in a busy environment, perhaps with a music background, or in a quiet setting? Some students learn best when they can volunteer and try things out; others need to feel very secure before trying anything new.

Nancy Foss (1994) points out that when students are asked to learn in a way that makes them uncomfortable, they experience stress. In a classroom where a student's learning style is never included, that student is constantly operating under stress, and learning is likely to be seriously affected. Foss recommends that teachers should be aware of when

an activity or an assignment will cause stress for one or more groups of students, and try to find ways to make the activity more comfortable. For example, some students who prefer very linear, clearly defined tasks will be under stress when assigned to create a skit with a group. Providing clear written directions and a template for the skit, as well as a written component as part of the skit preparation, will help to make these students more comfortable and help them to learn more effectively.

Multiple Intelligences

As we look at our classes closely we can make an important discovery. Each class is brimming with intelligence—but as with learning styles, each student's profile is different. The work of Howard Gardner (1983, 1993, 1999) and applications by Thomas Armstrong (1993, 1994) make us aware of eight distinct forms of intelligence that exist in our students, identified in Table 1.1. Each of the forms of intelligence is valuable and necessary in society, although most schools have tended to support and nurture only the first two: linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence. This practice has tended to leave other forms of intelligence with far less recognition in the school setting. Armstrong (1996) points out that despite the emphasis on the first two intelligences, U.S. students are not excelling in these areas, and he questions whether it might not be the case that children learn best when “their entire range of capability is addressed and when multiple connections are encouraged in a balanced way” (p. 2).

As language teachers in a system that has long valued linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence above all, we are in a good position to support other kinds of intelligence, too. Some teachers, as they plan their units and lessons, lay out all the intelligences on a grid and systematically include some activity for each type of intelligence. Such an approach respects the value of all the intelligences and encourages students to do their best work at all times.

In a 30-minute class period, touching on every intelligence might be quite a challenge, but we certainly can try to keep a balance among all of them over a week, or throughout a unit. Many of the activities and examples in this book show how we can touch on a number of different intelligences in our classes.

One of the important lessons that teachers can take from the research on learning styles and multiple intelligences is this: What interests and appeals to us as learners and as teachers is an important consideration as we plan. However, it is a very unreliable guide to meeting the needs and interests of all the students in our classes. In every class we teach, there are bound to be more students who are unlike us than there are those who are like us. It is our job to build bridges to all learning styles, helping students to learn, as much of the time as possible, in a way that is natural and comfortable to them. Our goal as language teachers is to support the learning of every student, appealing to a variety of learning styles, and to nurture all of the forms of intelligence represented in each of our classes. Our goal is for every learner to experience success—on his or her own terms as well as on ours.

TABLE 1.1 Multiple Intelligences and Their Applications to the Language Classroom

Intelligence	Excels at	Language Application
Linguistic	Reading, writing, telling stories, playing word games, etc.	Almost everything we do in class!
Logical-Mathematical	Experimenting, questioning, figuring out logical puzzles, calculating, etc.	Surveys, making charts and graphs
Spatial	Designing, drawing, visualizing, doodling, etc.	Illustrating a Gouin series; creating a picture of an object by writing the word for the object over and over
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Dancing, running, jumping, activities adding motions to songs and chants	Total Physical Response (TPR), building, touching, gesturing, etc.
Musical	Singing, whistling, humming, creating melodies for favorite rhymes	Using songs and rhythmic chants, tapping feet and hands, listening, etc.
Interpersonal	Leading, organizing, relating, manipulating, mediating, partying, etc.	Small group and partner work
Intrapersonal	Setting goals, meditating, dreaming, planning, being quiet	Journaling, portfolio building
Naturalist	Understanding, categorizing, explaining things in the world of nature	Photography, field trips, classifying

Sources: Adapted from Gardner (1983, 1993, 1999) and Armstrong (1993, 1994).

A second lesson, every bit as important as the first, has to do with the use of the information on learning styles and multiple intelligences. Each student in the classroom is an individual of remarkable complexity. No single category or set of categories is adequate to describe or explain that individual student, although at times the categories can be useful in finding a way to reach an individual student. If teachers begin to think in terms of “that concrete sequential in the second row” or “that naturalist right in front of me,” however, we have missed the point and also missed the precious individuality of each student in our classes. The categories are useful in helping us plan our classes and diversify our teaching, but they should never be used to sort our students into “boxes” that limit our understanding of the whole person. Howard Gardner (1999) identified this danger

very clearly: “People so labeled may then be seen as capable of working or learning only in certain ways, a characterization that is almost never true. Even if it has a certain rough-and-ready validity, such labeling can impede efforts to provide the best educational interventions for success with a wide range of children” (p. 91).

Thematic Teaching and Construction of Meaning

Thematic instruction is an integral part of early language learning and provides an ideal environment for constructing meaning. In thematic teaching, the curriculum is organized around a thematic center, which can originate in the classroom, the school, the environment, or the target culture. Language concepts and concepts from the regular curriculum and the target culture are interrelated and presented as a whole, within a thematic framework. Language is tailored to the developmental level of the students; activities address a variety of learning styles and call forth a range of multiple intelligences. Students have many opportunities for identifying patterns and connections, experiencing engaging activities with emotional content, and interacting with their peers. It is the goal of the thematic instruction described in this book to reach every child with meaningful language and culture experiences.

● **Developmental Characteristics of the Learner**

The most important factor in teaching and learning in any setting is the learner. Learners of any age differ from one another in significant ways: Individuals may learn best through listening or reading, they may learn more easily alone or within a small group, they may require heavy visual reinforcement or learn better through verbal explanations, or they may respond better to a sequential or to a random organization of materials or experiences. Each learner’s experiences differ from those of class peers in a variety of ways. Children and young adolescents, however, differ from older learners in certain patterned and predictable ways as they progress through stages of development. An understanding of these general developmental characteristics is essential for the elementary and middle school language teacher.

Piaget and Stages of Cognitive Development

The teaching of children has been profoundly affected by the work of Jean Piaget, who identified four stages of cognitive and affective development in childhood and adolescence. The child develops cognitively through active involvement with the environment, and each new step in development builds on and becomes integrated with previous steps. Because two of the four shifts in developmental stage normally occur during the elemen-

tary school years, it is important for language teachers working with children to keep the characteristics of each cognitive stage in mind (Piaget, 1963). They are as follows:

1. *The stage of sensory-motor intelligence (age 0 to 2 years)*. During this stage, behavior is primarily motor. The child does not yet internally represent events and “think” conceptually, although “cognitive” development is seen as schemata are constructed.
2. *The stage of preoperational thought (age 2 to 7 years)*. This stage is characterized by the development of language and other forms of representation and rapid conceptual development. Reasoning during this stage is pre-logical or semi-logical, and children tend to be very egocentric. Children often focus on a single feature of a situation at a time—for example, they may be able to sort by size or by color but not by both characteristics at once.
3. *The stage of concrete operations (age 7 to 11 years)*. During these years, the child develops the ability to apply logical thought to concrete problems. Hands-on, concrete experiences help children understand new concepts and ideas. Using language to exchange information becomes much more important than in earlier stages, as children become more social and less egocentric.
4. *The stage of formal operations (age 11 to 15 years or older)*. During this stage, the child’s cognitive structures reach their highest level of development. The child becomes able to apply logical reasoning to all classes of problems, including abstract problems either not coming from the child’s direct experience or having no concrete referents.

The thinking skills of most children in elementary school are at the concrete operations stage, and experience plays a major role in all learning. Piaget points out that children are not simply miniature adults who have less experience and thus less knowledge to work with as they approach problems and new situations. They do not think like adults because their minds are not like adult minds. It is the privilege of the elementary school teacher to share their world and learn to work within it. Characteristics of children as learners at different ages and implications for language teaching are described next.

Egan and Layers of Educational Development

The work of the Canadian educator Kieran Egan (1979, 1986, 1992) provides insights about educational development that are especially applicable to the elementary and middle school language program. Egan describes development in terms of the characteristics that determine how the learner makes sense of the world. He thinks of educational development as a process of accumulating and exercising layers of ability to engage with the world. As individuals develop, they add new layers of sophistication without leaving behind the qualities characteristic of earlier layers. As he puts it, “Each stage contributes something vital and necessary to the mature adult’s ability to make sense of the world and human experience” (1979, p. 86). The final stage, the ironic layer, is made up of essential

contributions from all the earlier stages, governed by the ironic orientation to the world. The characteristics of each of Egan's four layers are as follows:

The Mythic Layer: Ages 4 to 5 through 9 to 10 Years

- For these early elementary-school learners, emotions have primary importance. The students always want to know how to feel about what they are learning. They make sense of things through emotional and moral categories (e.g., good versus bad, happy versus sad, etc.).
- Young children are drawn into a topic or an idea through simple polar opposites. For example, they find it hard to resist the appeal of very tiny versus really huge, freezing cold versus burning hot, a wicked witch versus the perfect princess, and so on. Once presented in this way, concepts can be developed by filling in between the poles.
- The world of the imagination is vivid and real to these children, so they move easily in and out of a world where animals talk or activities take place on a magical trip to another world.
- Learners in the Mythic Layer often believe that the world thinks and feels as they do.
- These learners interpret the world in terms of absolutes, in the same way that a fairy tale world operates. The wicked witch is all bad; the daring prince is all good.
- Using story form is the ideal approach for teaching Mythic Layer learners. Like a fairy tale, instruction should have a clear and strong beginning, middle, and end; it should introduce things using strong opposites; it should address absolute meanings; and it should have strong emotional and moral appeal. Although it does not have to be a story, instruction should incorporate these strong story elements.

The Romantic Layer: Ages 8 to 9 through 14 to 15 Years

- Upper elementary and middle school learners begin to separate the world around them from their internal world—they no longer assume that the world thinks and feels as they do. They are developing a sense of their own identity within this wider world.
- Romantic Layer learners tend to see this outside world as both fascinating and frightening. As they seek out the limits of this world, they are drawn to extremes (e.g., the highest mountain, the longest word, etc.). They are also attracted to realistic detail—the more different from their own experience, the better.
- These learners are great collectors of everything from baseball cards to amazing facts about a country on another continent. They often enjoy research on topics of their own choosing, and they are good at memorizing.
- Because the outside world can seem threatening, elementary-age students learn best when new information incorporates and emphasizes qualities that can over-

come the threat—“transcendent” qualities such as courage, nobility, genius, ambition, energy, and creativity.

- Story form continues to be important for the Romantic Layer learner, with emphasis on realistic detail and real-life heroes and heroines.
- Although it may not seem evident, Romantic Layer learners are searching for and developing a sense of romance, wonder, and awe.

The Philosophic Layer: Ages 14 to 15 through 19 to 20 Years

- These learners have integrated their inner world with the outer world. They now understand the world to be a unit, of which they are a part.
- Learners in the Philosophic Layer try to organize the facts and details they collected in the Romantic Layer, creating their own systems for making sense of the world.
- Once they have developed a system of organization, these learners tend to believe that they have found *the* system, and they become (over)confident that they know the meaning of everything!

The Ironic Layer: Ages 19 to 20 through Adulthood

- The learner recognizes that no one system is adequate to organize all knowledge, but that systems are necessary to make sense of information. If one system does not work well, it can be discarded in favor of another one.
- This is the mature, adult learner.

Classroom Considerations for Elementary and Middle School Learners

Several experienced pre-K to middle school teachers have added their observations about students in different grade levels, primarily from the point of view of the language teacher. They are:

Vicki Alvis, Fulton County Public Schools, Georgia

Myriam Chapman, Bank Street School, New York City, New York

Hal Groce, Anoka-Hennepin Public Schools, Minnesota

Alan Hans, NBCT Early Adolescent Science, Hilliard Tharp School, Hilliard, Ohio

Patty Ryerson Hans, The Wellington School, Columbus, Ohio

Jessica Haxhi, Maloney Magnet School, Waterbury, Connecticut

Ana Lomba, Ana Lomba Early Languages LLC, Princeton Junction, New Jersey

Hildegard Merkle, Bethesda, Maryland

Kate Naughter, Amman, Jordan

Joel Swanson, Mounds Park Academy, St. Paul, Minnesota

Preschool Students (Ages 2 to 4)

Preschool children are in a sensitive period for language development. They absorb languages effortlessly and are adept imitators of speech sounds. Because they are very self-centered, they do not work well in groups, and they respond best to activities and learning situations relating to their own interests and experiences. Although they have a short attention span, they have great patience for repetition of the same activity or game. Preschoolers respond well to concrete experiences and to large-motor involvement in language learning.

Ana: Young children are very active and have short attention spans. It is important to plan your curriculum with that in mind. For a one-hour class I may have somewhere in the order of 10 to 15 different activities, but many of them are repeated from previous classes. Also, these activities are varied in nature to appeal to the diverse personalities of the students. It is a good idea to always carry an extra “life saving” activity. No matter how wonderful your activities for the day are and how great your expertise is, some days will be rough. In days like this I would take out a bag of play-dough or another tactile activity and postpone my wonderful plans to the next day. That’s how it is.

Developing phonological awareness in preschool is a critical skill in alphabetic languages. These phonological skills transfer from one language to another. Therefore, by including activities that develop phonological awareness in—say—Spanish, you are also helping young children move forward in their path to building reading skills in English. Now, that’s something all early language educators should know! By using rhymes, poems, stories, tongue twisters, and many other language-rich activities in your instruction you are not only helping young children acquire better communicational skills in the new language, but also taking them a huge step further in their path to becoming proficient readers in their first languages.

Primary Students (Ages 5 to 7): Kindergarten and Grades 1 and 2

Most primary-grade children are still preoperational, and they learn best with concrete experiences and immediate goals. New concepts and vocabulary are more meaningful when presented as pairs of binary opposites. Children like to name objects, define words, and learn about things in their own world; they also have vivid imaginations and respond well to stories of fantasy. They need to know how to feel about something in order to learn it well. Primary-age children learn through oral language; they are capable of developing good oral skills, pronunciation, and intonation when they have a good model. They learn

well, especially beginning in first grade, through dramatic play, role-play, and use of story form with a strong beginning, middle, and end. Because of their short attention spans, they need to have a great variety of activities, but the teacher must keep in mind that children of this age tire easily. They require large-muscle activity, and they are still rather unskilled with small-muscle tasks. Teachers of primary students must give very structured and specific directions and build regular routines and patterns into the daily lesson plans.

Kindergarten

Patty: Prekindergarten and kindergarten students need to know that there will be daily opportunities for moving, wiggling, manipulating objects, and using songs and/or rhythm. They love to share their favorites (favorite color, animal, fruit, etc.). They love to use every available sense and to experience “magic” (using colored water, magic boxes, [and noticing] the appearance of unusual things in the classroom). It is crucial for them to “have a turn.” When playing games, they are most comfortable when they can see the system for assuring that everyone will have a turn (cards or Popsicle sticks with each child’s name).

Hildegard: I often “forgot” that my kindergarten students were not German, they followed my commands and instructions with such ease. They need to feel accepted, liked, part of the group, and to be noticed and smiled at by the teacher. Feeling uncomfortable in class makes them physically sick (tummy ache). They like to move constantly, manipulate three-dimensional things, put things together and take apart, be enchanted by stories.

Jessica: Kindergartners are capable of much higher levels of conversation and content than we ordinarily assume. They enjoy short dialogues (name, likes, etc.) performed with puppets—especially talking about themselves! They are engaged when making predictions and experimenting, such as with “sink and float” lessons. They also like being able to comment at every stage of the class, using expressions such as “I’m done!” “Look at this!” and “I did it!”

Joel: These kids are a lot of fun. They will tell you what they are thinking and will not hold back. If you’ve gone too long someone will ask when the class is over. If they need to move, they will. When I am planning for kindergarten, I shoot for 9 to 10 activities in 35 minutes. Of course the “new” activity might just be a slight variation. You can throw in a twist on your song, or start making mistakes in a poem, but you have to plan ahead to keep them where you want them.

Grade 1

Patty: First-graders still crave structure and routine, but also like more surprises within that routine. Using chairs to help define each child’s space is more

helpful by this age. A system for turn taking is also still important. My first-grade students enjoy creating and playing games that reinforce whatever language elements we are working on. Games that involve closing eyes and hiding objects are especially successful. I generally have one bulletin board dedicated to whatever the first-grade students are learning about and they love seeing mysterious changes on the board and trying to figure out what caused them (i.e., What animal broke the branch off our apple tree?). They enjoy songs with big motions and the opportunity to add a silly twist to a song or game. Pretending is still very well received as well.

Hildegard: They need to feel successful. They like to take things home, tell endlessly about themselves, move, make things (crafts), draw, and label. They are interested in almost everything—holiday celebrations, fairy tales, themselves. Play, play, play! It is a good age to introduce and practice partner work and cooperative learning. Have a take-home folder for the parents to see.

Jessica: Our first-graders have enjoyed cultural activities that they can participate in physically, such as a summer festival dance, tea ceremony, or pretend “flower viewing” picnic. As fifth-graders, they often remember these early cultural experiences. They also respond well to carrying out classroom tasks, such as handing out and collecting scissors, crayons, pencils, and glue while using the target language.

Joel: They are learning to read and write and love it when they can do those things in the target language. I take advantage of that every time that I can. They love to be read to and are amazed that they can read some things in the target language. Don’t forget the short attention span. You will still need to plan a lot of activities for a 30- to 35-minute class.

Grade 2

Jessica: The energy of second-graders must be cherished! They are most willing to participate in story-form pretending, physical acting out of adventures [TPR], and even repetitive dialogues. As with each grade, though, units must be meaningful and have a driving purpose. Since second-graders get so excited, it is helpful to have a “cool-down” song or chant that leaves them quiet at the end of class.

Joel: Every day they remind me that they may be bigger than the kindergartners, but developmentally they have a lot in common. They can do a lot in the target language, but watch out for expecting too much. They still aren’t to the point where they can deal in abstracts. They also have difficulties with too many instructions at once. Don’t forget to break complicated instructions down into easy chunks.

Patty: Second-graders enjoy silly, surprise endings and having the opportunity to pretend that they are in a variety of situations. They also like to get specific

when learning about various animals and enjoy a scientific twist to a lesson whenever possible.

Intermediate Students (Ages 8 to 10): Grades 3, 4, and 5

Intermediate-grade students are at a maximum of openness to people and situations different from their own experience. For these children, a global emphasis is extremely important, because it gives them an opportunity to work with information about countries in all parts of the world. As intermediates develop the cognitive characteristics of the concrete operations level, they begin to understand cause and effect. Students in intermediate grades can work well in groups. They can begin a more systematic approach to language learning, but they continue to need firsthand, concrete experiences as a starting point and to benefit from learning that is embedded in context. The phenomenon of “boy germs” and “girl germs” begins to develop during these years, and children may resist partner situations with children of the opposite sex. They continue to benefit from experiences with imagination and fantasy, emphasis on binary opposites, and strong emotional connection to what is learned, as well as story form with distinctive beginning, middle, and end. In addition, they will benefit from themes based on real-life heroes and heroines who display transcendent qualities in overcoming the challenges of life.

Jessica points out that learners in these grades are bringing together much of the vocabulary and functional chunks learned in earlier years and can apply them in more complex situations. In assessment, they should be given meaningful contexts in which to use the language they already know and to create new language, such as when designing commercials or skits, responding to picture prompts, or writing letters to pen pals. Students can work readily with rubrics and they usually enjoy peer editing and scoring activities. Teachers can balance their picture of students’ language progress through keeping a record of mini-assessments that check for understanding during a unit, along with larger, rubric-scored assessments at the end of the unit.

Grade 3

Patty: My third-grade students enjoy legends, geographic facts and details, drama, and dressing up. By this age they appreciate the addition of gross details from time to time (as with the hole in the skull of St. Aubert in the legend of Mont St. Michel). They still need structured dialogues and writing tasks (like postcards) but crave an increased amount of choice within that structure. Math tasks incorporated into our lessons are also well received at this age. For example, during our study of the Loire Valley the students prepare floor plans on graph paper of a dream château. We then spend some time finding and comparing the area and perimeter of each student’s château and the various rooms.

Joel: Most of the kids can read and write in their first language. Working on the same skills in the target language (TL) is a lot easier at this point as well. They

love fairy tales and I have yet to meet the third-grader who doesn't enjoy trying to make up their own in the TL. They are also at a point where they can help with younger kids because they have such strong language skills. I like to combine classes and have the third-graders read to the kindergartners.

Jessica: Our third-graders always seem more settled down and academic than the previous year. They enjoy more complicated story-based themes but still love pretending. They can also handle more independent activities, such as making charts and illustrative pictures for presentations, surveying others, and working in pairs or groups.

Hildegard: They like to collect (the water museum, where students collected all kinds of water and labeled it, was very successful), create with language, write their own texts with the help of word banks, work with a partner (help each other, "proofread" and correct for each other, create together). Competitive games! They love humor, riddles, jokes. They are interested in everything about the country [of] the language they are learning—geography, foods, and climate.

Grade 4

Joel: You have a new kind of learner in fourth grade. They are getting into a new developmental level. Abstract thought is coming into play. So are hormones and a new kind of peer pressure. In many schools there is pressure to start "dating." Try to push yourself to see what the kids are really capable of. They will surprise you.

Hildegard: They need to feel like little scientists, discover, cook, make models, write creatively, perform and memorize plays. I used a "Let's Eat!" and "Let's Be Healthy!" unit with great success. We cooked and baked with each different food group, put on three different plays for the younger students and the parents, planned a healthy meal that everybody liked, cooked it, and served it to the community. After the meal we danced to traditional (live!) German music. The music, physical education, and art teachers were involved, as well as the classroom teacher.

Patty: My fourth-graders enjoy a bit more friendly competition within games than my younger students do. They are fascinated with history, facts, and legends. They are more eager to do written tasks and actually appreciate the responsibility of a little homework as long as it is a clear part of the routine. (I give homework every Wednesday that is due every Friday. The parents and homeroom teachers are aware of this from the beginning of the year.) Students this age seem to enjoy putting themselves in other people's shoes, so we create imaginary families as we visit French-speaking countries across the world. In this way they choose a new name and must share their likes and dislikes based on research they have done about the country in which they now

“live.” We do more activities in the computer lab at this stage. We don’t do free Internet searches (not allowed in most elementary schools), but with book-marked sites the students can do guided research as we explore various topics.

Jessica: Students in this grade seem to be more metacognitive about their language learning. They ask questions about “why” the language is used in certain ways and they see patterns and differences. I begin doing some direct strategy instruction in this grade to help them see how to extend their conversations and really respond to other speakers, as well as how to find meaning in context (while both reading and listening).

Grade 5

Jessica: Fifth-grade is a challenge! The “newness” of learning another language has worn off long ago, and the language students can use is becoming more difficult. Some students may have decided that they don’t like learning the language. The key is to provide experiences that reignite students’ interest in the language and culture while building on their language ability. They enjoy Internet-based activities, dialogues that they can manipulate to be funny and interesting, assignments with multiple intelligences-based choices (a song, a drawing, a written piece, etc.), and learning about teens in the target culture. Some recent student interviews in our schools showed that they are most interested in being able to choose their own groups and partners at this age and throughout middle school.

Hildegard: They like to sit in their chairs (surprise!), memorize lists and poems and plays, write extensively, create books and projects, and perform. They like to work seriously and be seen as “adults.” They used the Internet to research about Germany. They are interested in German peers and their social life; they like to display posters with writing and art. Successful strategies: Give clear expectations at [the] beginning of [a] unit; make students responsible for their own learning. Allow time before or after school (or by email) for extra help and questions. Give directions in written form, in the target language, of course. Students had German pen pals, and many kept them until graduation.

Vicki: Fifth-graders are often the oldest students in an elementary building. They are eager to serve as school and classroom leaders so it makes sense to involve them in leadership roles where they can show off their skills in the target language. My fifth-graders enjoy using fun props to report the weather and give the lunch menu in Spanish for the school’s daily newscast. Teachers and administrators appreciated fifth-grade students using their language skills to promote special emphases during the school year. For D.E.A.R. Day (Drop Everything And Read) my students read books from the school media center in Spanish or about Spanish language cultures, and then wrote and shared mini-book reviews for broadcast on the TV news. A good way to wrap up the

school year is to have fifth-graders write letters to tell incoming students what to expect in Spanish class. The next year's crop of new students loved receiving the letters, and writing them gave my fifth-graders a chance to reflect on their journey as language students. Provide fifth-grade students a chance to shine beyond the school day by performing songs or skits for PTA meetings or International Night and entering foreign language association spoken language and poster contests. Making your oldest elementary-age students and their language skills visible will result in leadership opportunities for students as well as a valuable advocacy tool for your program.

In the classroom set routines and procedures that will allow students to assert their growing sense of independence constructively. For example, early on in the school year have students practice moving into groups quickly and efficiently by saying something as simple as “You have one minute to form groups of ____ (two, three, five, etc.)” Keep in mind that older students may have extended seat time in their other classes, so build in opportunities for students to move in every lesson. Fifth-grade students are school-savvy enough to consciously begin to develop a sense of how they learn. Create self-assessment checklists and offer students choices between various products for assessments. Children at this age are developing literacy skills in the target language as they fine-tune the skills in their first language, and they are quite empathetic and social. Consequently, it is a good time to introduce pen pals/e-pals or just exchange hand written and personally illustrated postcards between “secret classmates” in the same building. Be sure to recycle vocabulary and structures from prior grades, but not activities, unless the activities can be made more challenging, meaningful, engaging and developmentally appropriate for this age. Above all, keep in mind that fifth-graders may be the “seniors” in the building, but they want to have fun as they learn.

Early Adolescent Students (Ages 11 to 14): Grades 6, 7, and 8

During the middle school and junior high school years, students are undergoing more dramatic developmental changes than experienced at any other time in life, and on widely differing timetables. The early adolescent must learn to deal with a variety of experiences: emerging sexuality in a changing and often unpredictable body; reaching a cognitive plateau for a time, and then finding new, adult intellectual tools; multiplying and rapidly shifting interests; a fluid and flexible self-concept; a need to rework interpersonal relationships with adults; turbulent emotions; extreme idealism; a need to assert independence; and a powerful peer group. A major goal of all schooling for children of this age is the encouragement of positive relationships and positive self-image. Middle school learners need the opportunity for broad exploration, as well as an introduction to the demands of academic disciplines.

Because exploring the limits of the real world is very important at this age, students will respond well to opportunities to learn in exhaustive detail about subjects that interest them. Heroic figures with qualities that transcend threats are especially good choices for emphasis, and middle school-aged children need learning experiences with a strong affective component. Students show high interest in the unusual and the extremes in the real world.

Myriam describes middle school students in loving terms: “They have not yet become disaffected with school; they wear their hearts on their sleeves as long as it doesn’t show too much; and they can be ‘won over’ if what you want from them doesn’t interfere with their friendships or humiliate them in any way. They want to succeed in school, they enjoy mastery (‘Hey, we really learned a lot today’), and they’ll do just about anything so long as the expectations are clear and within the range of their abilities. I love their complexity and their struggles. I dislike their pettiness (squabbles over what seem to adults to be silly issues), their defensiveness (“She started it!”), and their occasional thoughtless cruelty to each other (especially among seventh-grade girls). I find that the hardest thing to keep in mind is that they are children. As their teacher, I can become so identified with them that I forget that they are still at the beginning of their lives as learners and developing human beings.”

Myriam also notes: “Content-based units with a definite culminating product work very well with all these groups. In every case, students must have something to show at the end of their unit of study: a book, a skit, a video presentation, a poster, a mural.”

Grade 6

Alan: What motivates a sixth-grader? Extremes—things that are really outrageous or gross. Hearing stories about real life and real problems. Personal tales of challenge and triumph, especially from the teacher’s own life. The safety of working and presenting with others. Integrating elements from television, pop culture, and general teen *angst* (remember what it was like to be 11?) into the curriculum in some way. Don’t assume they are adults when giving directions and tasks, but remember they love to be treated as if they are grown up. They need and want someone to lead, to look up to, even if they don’t act that way at times. They love challenges, to beat a certain score, time, or amount of something—make this attainable and you’ll get more out of them. Pets, music, and team sports are good topics from which to draw activity ideas, especially helpful when trying to connect with students who are frequently disengaged.

Give them opportunities to assess their own learning. Have them grade their own rubric before finishing a project or task, then verify. This will yield valuable information on the students’ perceptions of themselves and the clarity with which you communicated expectations.

Provide sixth-graders with structure—they need it. Partner tasks work well. We often assume they can do more than they are able to, and we tend to

get frustrated when they don't understand things in which we should provide them more guidance. Yet within this structure, they have the freedom to create, to share their funny, creative, outrageous, and unpredictable side. They'll typically share experiences of a painful injury, a "disgusting" thing they did, or sometimes will show a part of themselves which reveals wisdom and reflection beyond their years. These unpredictable behaviors, their ups and downs of everyday living and their outward expression of these feelings makes teaching young people of this age eternally fresh and interesting.

Hal: Sixth-graders want to know the "weirdities" in their own culture, as well as in others. They love to compare and contrast. Venn diagrams work extremely well, and prove to be beneficial at proving similarities. They love to research other cultures and find the "strange" points of interest. They also like to determine what would be "strange" to others about American cultures.

Activities must change about every 10 to 15 minutes. Transition is very important. It's hard to keep kids on task when they can't use what they've just learned in the next activity. They like partner work, but still want to work with same-sex groups. They don't seem to mind when partners switch every 2 to 3 minutes, such as with interviews, however. Activities are always timed. When I give them less time than I think they will need to complete an activity, it becomes more of a challenge for them and it keeps them on task. If they're working and on task, I extend their time. I've found with all language students, including English Language Learners, accountability is imperative. They must have something produced, and quality is important.

The teacher is a "monitor." The students must be given information to use. Once they have enough, they need the opportunity to be creative with it and explore their world. They don't want "peer" teachers—teachers who act like they do. They do want teachers who can relate to them and understand their vocabulary and interests. The adult role is extremely important.

Learners at this age level love to create new things and show them off. They especially like making menus and doing projects that can be displayed. They love supplemental language that doesn't appear in books and that "only they" know.

Vicki Sixth-graders are willing to take chances and try out new language and cultural experiences, but at the same time they need the security of regular classroom routines and well-established procedures. They can be very empathetic toward others, which makes them willing to accept and appreciate cultural differences. They are very social, so I provide frequent and meaningful partner and small group activities. They like games, not so much for the competition as for the opportunity to try out the language while they play. Sixth-graders are eager to participate when tasks are based on real-life situations, such as expressing and supporting their personal opinions in creating a "Best and Worst of" brochure to introduce visitors to business in their community.

Grade 7

Hildegard: [Seventh-graders] like to go outside the classroom to conduct interviews, and help with and teach the younger grades. They learn (and even study hard!) when it is for a reason.

They like to read authentic texts and discuss them. Nobody liked our textbook. The best-liked unit was “Besuch im Zoo,” where groups of students created posters and prepared presentations for the rest of the school and the public, and then talked about their animal at the German Day at the Zoo. It was a good opportunity to use correct spelling and grammar and to work on precision.

Hal: This age is more concerned with getting their point across than correctness of language, although accuracy is starting to develop. They are interested in what kids their own ages are doing in the target culture, and the vocabulary they use in everyday speech. They’re more willing to work in mixed partner activities, depending on the time of year. The teacher is more “instructor.” Information is still given for immediate use. Students are more intimidated to use it creatively, though.

Seventh-graders are beginning to prefer age-appropriate activities, such as telephone conversations, or shopping, or TV prompts. [They are] a bit more self-absorbed than sixth-grade students. As with sixth-graders, however, all language learning must have a purpose. These students aren’t concerned with register, the grammar, or whether or not the language is totally correct. Their concern is using the language and having others use it with them in return.

Myriam: The common assumption is that seventh-graders are ready to look at language as a system, but this is the case for only a very few. I try to teach the language before I get students to analyze it, and I make grammar fun with all sorts of approaches, balls thrown in the air, magical sentences, etc. But in the end, I have concluded—teach grammar if you must, but don’t expect it to stick!

Kate: Seventh-graders are both playful and intellectual. They need to be motivated by doing something that has meaning for them. They appreciate routine and clear guidelines (e.g., . . . homework is [assigned] every day). They need to have the teacher say things over and over again. When you have 20+ kids, they’re not all hearing you at the same time. I like how they surprise themselves. They really do like to learn, even though they put on this persona that maybe it’s not cool, or pretend they’re not smart.

Grade 8

Hal: The “real” world starts rearing its head in the eighth grade. Students are interested in technology and how to communicate with others. As with seventh-graders, these students like to use the language in realistic situations,

such as giving and taking direction, asking and denying information, and so on. This age group still likes to explore, but a little more outside their “safe” world. This is where technology makes teaching profitable. They’re curious about what they don’t understand, but are hesitant (at times) to pursue it without guidance. An abundance of vocabulary, especially slang, is a must. Most cultures are interested in music, and modern music plays a vital role at this age level.

Students in eighth grade want more direct answers. They also want to learn things and share with their peers in an “informal” setting. Since seventh- and eighth-grade culture focuses so much on school and peers, much time should be devoted to this study in the target culture as well. The emphasis should be on similarities rather than on differences. Partner work is much easier at this age level (in comparison to sixth grade). Activities must change about every 20 minutes, depending on interest level. Students begin writing notes and postcards to others at this level as well.

Eighth grade is a good time to “reintroduce” fairy tales and other things kids learned while growing up. They like to be teachers for others (younger students or brothers and/or sisters). They especially love to compare and contrast fairy tales of their own culture with those of the target cultures, as well as rewriting fairy tales as much as their language level permits.

Hildegard: They need to feel grown up and almost equal to the teacher, respected—their opinion has to count. They like to do their own things their own way. They become self-motivated (some). They are interested in justice, global awareness, world peace, religion(s), and they are out to better the world. The teacher needs to tell students what needs to be done, give them strategies to accomplish the task, and then give them time to do it independently. Give clear descriptors of expectations and grading procedures; rubrics worked best for me. Unfortunately, many students come to our classes with loads of problems, so be gentle with their feelings.

Myriam: My eighth-graders keep journals. They must write 12 sentences in French every week. I respond to their entries, commenting and keeping a conversation going. I also point out simple errors and I may include information that is not in the curriculum but which can be useful to the writer. I do not correct all grammatical errors since this journal writing is about self-expression and experimenting with language and not about being grammatically correct. Some students like to share their journals with friends or with the whole class, and some want to write continuing stories. These are collected and become class books that everyone can read.

Kate: Eighth-graders are more receptive and more socially aware. They are finding out about themselves; they can be reflective and see their own growth. When even one or two have political or social savvy, they can lead the class into a great place—sharing opinions, asking questions. Like seventh-graders, they are very curious and very vulnerable, despite the façade.

Summary

- Second-language acquisition theory, learning styles, multiple intelligences, brain research, cognitive psychology, and information about cognitive and educational development all contribute to a greater understanding of languages and learners.
- Information in these areas is always evolving and is subject to new questions and interpretations as our understanding of human development and the mind continues to change and grow.
- Thematic teaching is an approach to curriculum development and classroom planning that can help the teacher capitalize on the information we have about learners and their wonderful diversity.

For Study and Discussion

1. Choose a topic or a lesson (such as animals, foods, geography) that could be of interest to children at several age levels and explain how you would approach it differently at each of three different levels:
 - a. kindergarten
 - b. grade 3
 - c. grade 6 or grade 7
2. Examine a lesson you have designed, taught, or found in a book of lesson plans. What learning styles and intelligences are supported in this plan? Are any left out? How could you adjust the lesson to be more inclusive?
3. Choose the grade level with which you are the most familiar, and reread all the descriptions of students at this grade level found in the chapter. How well do they reflect your own experiences? What descriptors would you add or change?
4. Read additional information about learning styles and multiple intelligences, using references at the end of this chapter or others. Then create a profile of yourself as a learner, in terms of both learning styles and multiple intelligences. Which students in your classroom will you need to pay particular attention to because of differences in style and intelligences? What types of activities will you need to include in the class if you are going to meet their needs?

For Further Reading

The following sources are recommended for additional information about material covered in this chapter. Chapter citations are documented in Works Cited at the end of this book.

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- Kennedy, Teresa, and Susan Reese. "A Look at Research on Foreign Language Learning and the Brain." *The Language Educator* 2:6 (November 2007): 32–35.

Websites of Interest

- Center for Teaching and Learning (Learning Styles): www1.indstate.edu/cirt1/facdev/pedagogies/styles/lsl.html.
- Foreign Language Study and the Brain: <http://ivc.vidaho.edu/flbrain/>.
- Lazear, David G. New Dimensions of Learning site: Exploring Multiple Intelligences: <http://newdimensionspress.com/whatismiq.htm>.
- Learning Styles Resource Page: www.oswego.edu/~shindler/lstyle.htm.
- Enhance Learning with Technology: Learning Styles: <http://members.shaw.ca/priscillatheroux/styles.html>.