

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

Michael H Long and David Nunan

Workshop guide prepared by David Nunan



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A Introduction

This workshop guide accompanies the NCRC video *Second language acquisition and the language curriculum*. Research into second language acquisition is coming under increasing scrutiny by language teachers. This research illuminates processes of language acquisition inside and outside the classroom.

In this workshop, we shall look at work being carried out by researchers in the field of second language acquisition which has relevance for language teachers. The workshop will be particularly concerned with the following questions:

- 1 What is second language acquisition?
- 2 What questions are currently occupying SLA researchers?
- 3 What is the effect of formal instruction on language acquisition?
- 4 What does the research have to say on whether or not syllabuses should be structurally graded?
- 5 What does the research have to say on whether or not grammar should be explicitly taught?
- 6 What types of classroom activities appear to promote language acquisition?

The activities in this guide and the accompanying video provide enough material for a four-six hour workshop. Attempting to cover the material in less time than this, particularly with participants who are unfamiliar with second language acquisition, is likely to result in confusion. In particular, the content of the video is conceptually dense and participants need adequate time to work through the pre-viewing activities before viewing the video.

B Activities to be carried out before viewing the video

ACTIVITY 1

Indicate your attitude to the following statements.

- 1 One's first language has no effect on the acquisition of a second (ie learning English is the same for a Spanish as for a Japanese L1 speaker). (agree/disagree/don't know)
- 2 Environment factors (eg formal classroom instruction) have less effect on acquisition than specific features of the target language. (agree/disagree/don't know)
- 3 The age at which one begins learning another language is irrelevant to one's ultimate attainment in that language. (agree/disagree/don't know)

In small groups, discuss your responses to these statements.

In particular, what evidence do you have for your responses?

ACTIVITY 2

Research shows that for many morphosyntactic features of the language, learners progress through a predetermined sequence. In acquiring 'negation' in English, for example, there seem to be four stages. Rank the following stages from 1 to 4 in the order in which you think they are acquired.

- ___ auxiliary + negative 'I can't play guitar'
- ___ 'no' + verb 'No have work'
- ___ analysed don't 'He didn't go home'
- ___ don't + verb 'Yesterday, I don't see him'

In small groups, discuss your rankings.

ACTIVITY 3

Indicate your attitude to the following statements.

- 1 Instruction can help learners 'skip' developmental stages. (agree/disagree/don't know)
- 2 Instruction speeds up the rate of acquisition. (agree/disagree/don't know)
- 3 Instructed learners end up progressing further in the target language than 'naturalistic' learners. (agree/disagree/don't know)
- 4 Instructed learners make more errors than 'naturalistic' learners. (agree/disagree/don't know)

In small groups, discuss your responses to these statements.

What evidence do you have for the responses you have given?

ACTIVITY 4

Answer the following key questions for curriculum design.

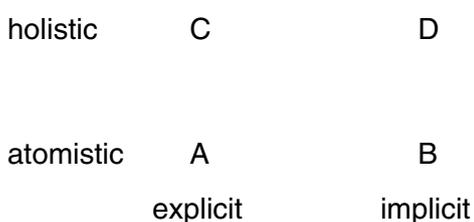
- 1 Should the syllabus be linguistically graded? (yes/no)
- 2 Should rules/generalisations be explicitly taught? (yes/no)

Broadly speaking, language programs can be rated according to the extent to which input is graded and rules/generalisations explicitly taught. In fact, we can think of four curriculum archetypes:

- A Input is graded; rules are explicitly taught.
- B Input is graded; rules are not explicitly taught.
- C Input is not graded; rules are explicitly taught.
- D Input is not graded; rules are not explicitly taught.

Which of these archetypes comes closest to describing the course you are currently teaching?

In fact, grading and explicit teaching represent continua rather than discrete categories. This is demonstrated on the following graph.



Where would your course reside on the graph?

What curriculum archetypes do you think the following statements represent?

STATEMENT 1

I think there is no support whatever for structurally-graded syllabuses ... (however) periodically I encourage a focus on form. The pedagogic task in class will always be some problem-solving activity, but periodically the teacher might notice errors that are systematic. At this point, the teacher might introduce an activity which focuses on form.

(Long 1987)

STATEMENT 2

If it is true that we acquire languages via comprehensible input, and if language acquisition is central, not language learning, then it follows that the most important element in any language teaching program is input. Language is best taught when it is used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning.

(Krashen and Terrell 1983: 35)

STATEMENT 3

... the development of competence in a second language requires not systematisation of language inputs or maximisation of planned practice, but rather the creation of conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope with communication. ... competence in a language was seen as consisting primarily of an ability to conform automatically to grammatical norms, and communication as a matter of understanding, arriving at, or conveying meaning. ... Attempts to systematise inputs to the learner through a linguistically organised syllabus, or to maximise the practice of particular parts of the language structure through activities deliberately designed for that purpose were regarded as unhelpful to the development of grammatical competence and detrimental to the desired preoccupation with meaning in the classroom.

(Prabhu 1987: 1–2)

C Activities to be carried out after viewing the video

PRELIMINARY ACTIVITY

Go back over the activities you completed before viewing the video.

Having seen the video, are there any responses you would like to change?

ACTIVITY 1

At what stages are the following learners in the development of negation?

- 1 'We have not enough materials'.
- 2 'No understand'.
- 3 'We drink vodka and we no eat'.
- 4 'I didn't travel before my leave Poland'.
- 5 'Is not problem for me'.
- 6 'No like this'.
- 7 'I will no work'.
- 8 'He don't have job'.

ACTIVITY 2

Discuss the following questions in pairs or small groups.

- 1 Research shows that learners who receive instruction make more errors than those who do not receive instruction.
- 2 Should it therefore be concluded that learners should not receive instruction?
- 3 How did Long account for this finding?

ACTIVITY 3

Refer back to the discussion of curriculum archetypes, and in pairs or small groups answer the following questions.

- 1 What type of curriculum proposal does Long support?
- 2 Provide examples of the other curriculum archetypes.

ACTIVITY 4

List the four steps in the Long course design approach.

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____

What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of the following types of task?

one-way tasks

two-way tasks

divergent tasks

convergent tasks

tasks related to the 'here and now'

tasks displaced in time and space

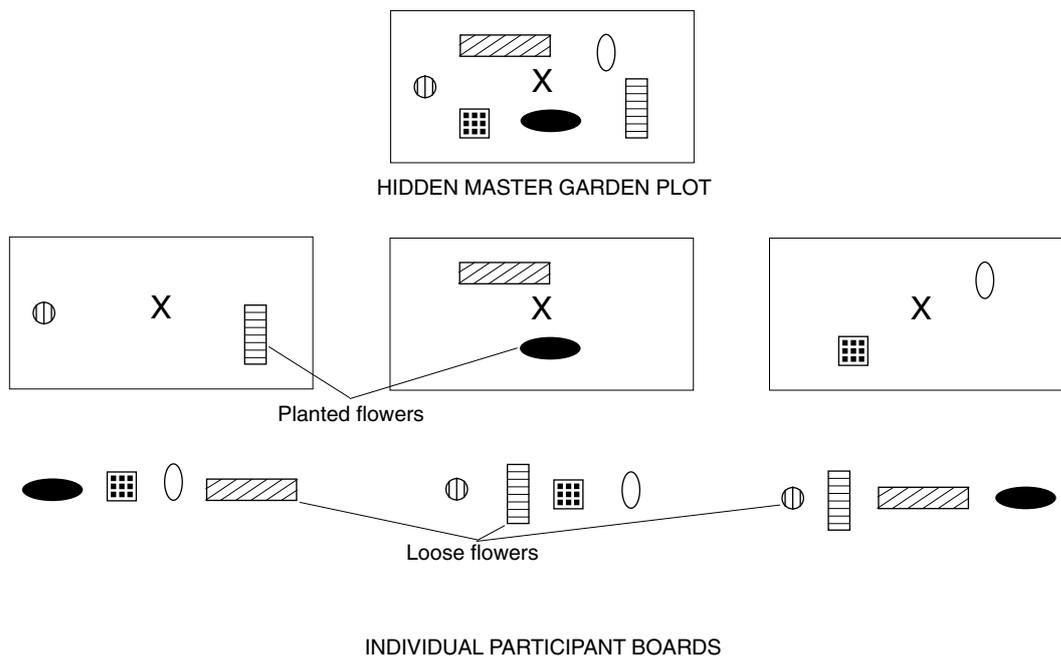
What are some of the factors involved in task difficulty?

ACTIVITY 5

Two-way information gap tasks.

Study the following two-way information gap task which has been taken from Doughty and Pica (1986).

Required Information Exchange Task



Note: This is a reduced version, using abstract figures to represent the flowers used in the task.

For the task, each participant has a felt-board 'garden' and several loose felt flowers. Each board has planted on it three items from the master garden, no two boards being the same. Participants are only allowed to see their own board. They are required to exchange information with each other in order to replicate the master plot. At the end of the activity, participants compare their gardens with the master plot.

In small groups, devise a two-way information gap task which would be suitable for the students you teach.

- 1 Compare the task with those developed by other groups.
- 2 Does the content reflect the needs and interests of your students?

D Summaries of some sample studies into second language acquisition in the classroom

These summaries are intended to give some idea of the scope and focus of research investigating SLA in the classroom. If you are interested in these studies, you are advised to read the original reports. It is also highly advisable to look at the additional literature provided in the select list of references.

Long, M 1981. 'Questions in foreigner talk discourse'. *Language Learning*, 31: 135–158

Conversational modification in the form of clarification requests ('What do you mean by...?'), confirmation checks ('You said you've been learning English for three years?'), comprehension checks ('You know what I mean?') and repetitions make input comprehensible and thereby promote second language acquisition. In other words, the negotiation of meaning is crucial to SLA (comprehensible input is necessary but not sufficient).

Two-way information gap activities (which require the exchange of information among all participants, each of whom possesses some piece of information not known, but required by all other participants to solve a problem) facilitate comprehension. Such activities promote optimal conditions for students to adjust their input to each other's level of comprehension (ie modifying the interaction) and thereby facilitate their second language acquisition.

Long, M 1983. 'Does second language instruction make a difference?: A review of research'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17, 3: 359–382

This paper reviews studies reporting conflicting findings on the efficacy of instruction. However, the picture is clarified if two distinctions are observed: i) the absolute effect of instruction versus its relative utility and ii) whether or not studies controlled for instruction and/or naturalistic exposure.

While not overwhelming, results suggest that, on balance, instruction is beneficial for children as well as adults, for beginning, intermediate and advanced students, on integrative as well as discrete point tests and in both acquisition-rich and acquisition-poor environments.

Doughty, C and T Pica 1986. 'Information gap tasks: Do they facilitate second language acquisition?' *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 2

This paper reports on studies conducted to determine the effects of task type (involving optional and required information exchange) and participation pattern (teacher directed, small group and pairs). Results suggest that a task with a requirement for information exchange (a two-way information gap activity) is crucial to the generation of conversational modification of classroom interaction. The study accepts the premise that conversational modification (interaction which is altered linguistically or conversationally to facilitate comprehension of intended message) is instrumental in second language acquisition. Small groups and pairs produce more modification than teacher-fronted (whole class) work.

Duff, P 1986. Another look at interlanguage talk: Taking task to task. In Day, R (ed) 1986. *Talking to learn*. Newbury House: Rowley Ma

This study examines the effect of task type (convergent or problem-solving tasks versus divergent tasks, eg debates) on the input and interaction of non-native speaker-non-native speaker dyads.

While both types of task can be considered two-way, in that there is required information exchange between members of the dyads, the study shows that debates reduce the opportunities for negotiation of input and are therefore hypothesised to be less effective for acquisition. (Duff does not rule out the use of debates, suggesting that both convergent and divergent tasks have value in the language class.)

Rulon, K and J McCreary 1986. Negotiation of content: Teacher-fronted and small-group interaction. In Day, R (ed) 1986. *Talking to learn*. Newbury House: Rowley Ma

The purpose of this study was to examine negotiated interaction in small-group and teacher-fronted activities in the ESL classroom. It was found that when students are placed in a group situation and asked to complete a contextualised two-way task, significantly more negotiation of content takes place than when the teacher leads the discussion. It is concluded that 'working in small groups after the completion of listening and/or reading comprehension passages may not only promote an atmosphere essential to successful second language learning but may enhance the students' comprehension of the passage as well.' (p195).

Porter, P 1986. How learners talk to each other: Input and interaction in task-centred discussions. In Day, R (ed) 1986. *Talking to learn*. Newbury House: Rowley Ma

Porter conducted a study into the language used by adult ESL subjects and native speakers of English in task-centred discussions. She found that input received by ESL students from non-native speakers was just as comprehensible as that from native speakers. In fact, she found that learners received more and better quality input from advanced learners than from either intermediate learners or native speakers, and that learners produce more speech when talking to each other than when to native speakers.

E References and suggested additional reading

Day, R (ed) 1986. *Talking to learn*. Newbury House: Rowley Ma

Dulay, H, M Burt and S Krashen 1982. *Language two*. Oxford University Press: Oxford

Ellis, R 1985. *Understanding second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press: Oxford

Hyltenstam, K and M Pienemann (eds) 1985. *Modelling and assessing second language acquisition*. Multilingual Matters: Clevedon Avon

Johnston, M 1985. *Syntactic and morphological progressions in learner English*. Canberra: DIEA

Johnston, M 1985. 'Second language acquisition research in the Adult Migrant Education Program'. *Prospect*, 1, 1

Long, M 1983. 'Does second language instruction make a difference?: A review of research'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17, 3

Long, M and G Crookes 1986. 'Intervention points in second language classroom processes'. Paper presented at the *RELC Regional Seminar*, Singapore

Long, M 1987. 'Second language acquisition and the language curriculum'. (An interview with David Nunan) *Prospect*, 2, 3

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Prabhu, N 1987. *Second language pedagogy: A perspective*. Oxford University Press: Oxford