

*Discussion Paper*

**Understanding L2 Acquisition  
in English Language Learners:  
The Interplay of Age-related, Cognitive,  
and Sociocultural Factors  
and Their Implications for Instructional Practices**

---

**Pragasit Sitthitikul**

**Abstract**

In this paper, I firstly focus on significant issues regarding the development of second language acquisition in general. After that, I discuss some major factors affecting second language acquisition in children and adults to provide a better understanding of the differences in acquiring L2 between the two groups. Finally, I suggest effective principles and instructional practices for L2 young learners to facilitate, promote, and enhance their English language achievement.

**Understanding L2 Acquisition  
in English Language Learners:  
The Interplay of Age-related, Cognitive,  
and Sociocultural Factors, and Their Implications  
for Instructional Practices**

**Pragasit Sitthitikul**

**Major Issues in Second Language Acquisition  
Development**

Language acquisition is one of the most complex developmental processes (Perez & Torres-Guzman, 2002) People need to communicate with each other through language. Hence, language involves cognition in that it helps people understand and master their world (Perez & Torres-Guzman, 2002) In addition, language is a component of culture and a tool to transmit thought (Hakuta, 1990) Thus, research suggests that second language acquisition stems from cognitive development, program structure and goals, the tensions regarding “code-switching” (Garcia, in press, p. 18) and language separation, the similarities and differences of language systems, the practices, etc. (Pica, 1985; Ellis, 1994) In other words, there are several factors or influences within the learners and from external sources which may contribute to learning progress (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) Vygotsky (1978) commented that cooperation between students and their teachers (or peers who act as teachers) is central to cognitive development. He argued that “internal cognitive development is triggered when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers”

(p. 90). His argument illustrated the link between cognition and social interaction that enhance language development.

Regarding the variables within the learners in language acquisition, the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) explains the differences between child and adult acquisition.

While the filter may exist for the child second language acquirer, it is rarely, in natural informal language acquisition situations, high enough to prevent native-like levels of attainment. For the adult it rarely goes low enough to allow native-like attainment. (p. 13)

The above hypothesis is supported by the theory proposed by Chomsky (1997) that some aspects of language learning involve innateness, and that all children have an inner drive and ability to learn a language. To elaborate the point, children who learn a second language during early childhood, from birth to age five, acquire most of the first language skills that they will use for the rest of their lives, and there is little deleterious effect when they develop a second language (Chomsky, 1997) Perez & Torres-Guzman (2002) supported the idea that “children use the appropriate form for both languages even in mixed utterances” (p. 25).

The Compensation Model (Park, 1994) is another supportive concept that explains the development of language acquisition in the continuum from childhood to adulthood. A distinction is made between child and adult language acquisition. This model states that child language acquisition is explained by parameter setting in language-specific

cognition, which consists of knowledge of “Universal Grammar” (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 168) and language learning principles; and that adult language acquisition is explained by information-processing in general cognition, which consists of knowledge of the L1 and language learning strategies. In Universal Grammar theory, Gass & Selinker (2001) explained that “universal principles form part of the mental representation of language, and that language consists of a set of abstract principles that characterize core grammars of all natural languages” (p. 169). Thus, adult language learners need to use language-learning strategies mainly to facilitate information input processing. This, then, explains why many ESL/EFL adult learners have difficulty learning English, especially when the differences between Asian languages and English are much greater than the differences between English and European languages and English such as French, Spanish, German, etc.

To conclude, the concepts in second language acquisition mentioned above help to explain some major aspects to some extent what affects the ways in which child and adult acquire the second language. These factors include age-related, and cognitive and social factors, among other variables.

### **Principles and Practices of L2 Instruction**

Learning English is not easy. Many students acquire a functional level of English that allows them to communicate with their peers in about two years. However, it takes about five to seven years to acquire academic language skills (Cummins, 1983) Just learning new words is not enough;

there are content concepts, procedural steps, and vocabulary that need to be understood before content can be mastered. Students who can already read and write well in their primary language have an easier time adjusting to schools where a new language is spoken. However, these students still need effective and productive instruction and interaction. Much of what the L2 students need depends on their stage of English proficiency. The several stages have been defined as follows (Vogt & Shearer, 2003, pp. 8-9):

- Beginning/Preproduction: Students at this stage may comprehend limited amounts of English instruction. They rely on visual and other clues to understanding. Students will follow shared readings and will rely on illustrations and graphic clues to attach meaning to printed materials.
- Early Production: Students at this stage are actively developing receptive vocabulary. They comprehend simple passages and can follow texts during group reading. They can use simple sentences and details in their writing.
- Intermediate/Advanced: Students continue to build vocabulary. They may engage in independent reading according to their level of oral fluency and prior experiences with print. They are able to write in greater detail for a variety of purposes.

To accomplish the goals above, research suggests the following major instructional practices that are effective in improving L2 learners' literacy skills.

*Thematic units.* Thematically integrated units of learning provide for varied language input to students, enabling them to acquire the varieties of language necessary for academic success (Perez & Torres-Guzman, 2002). In addition, students are challenged cognitively through the acquisition of content information and are provided opportunities to develop learning strategies to assist future learning. The idea is that lessons should be organized in thematic units, which are developed based on themes through a variety of authentic and integrated literacy hands-on activities. Themes involve the whole class, small groups, and individual students in an activity that will give them a sense of accomplishment and success before they work on the final project.

*Native language support.* The use of L1 support such as L1 resources, bilingual dictionaries, and so on, helps students to understand the concepts in focus, and at the same time helps them acquire language proficiency. Students would benefit from L1 instruction and support in content concepts while they are learning English so that they will have a better chance to catch up with the curriculum (Perogoy & Boyle, 2001). In addition, reading a text in the native language that later will be read in English helps to scaffold the students' comprehension of the English text by providing them with key knowledge about the topic, genre, story structure or text structure, and vocabulary (Garcia, in press). Teachers may have to use students' native language (if they know the language or have an aide or a tutor or students who do) to explain or translate unclear parts and accept and build on students' spontaneous and authentic responses in either English or their native language. When teachers use the native language

and ESL techniques (such as speaking slowly and clearly) to promote students' understanding of the English books being read, then their participation usually improves (Perogoy & Boyle, 2001). The students will finally develop reading comprehension and oral fluency in both languages simultaneously.

*Literature and trade books.* Elley (1991) found that students performed better when they are provided with books of high interest and can choose the books that they are interested in. Teachers should allow students to read silently and give them comprehensible instruction. The use of literature and trade books gives students more exposure to the printed materials. It allows them to share what they read with their friends and with the class. In this way, they will have more interaction with their friends and will feel confident that they have something to share. They will gradually develop literacy and expand their content knowledge of the various kinds of books they read (Cummins, 1983).

*Cooperative learning.* Cooperative learning enables students to have more interaction with their peers. Usually students are required to solve a problem in groups. They have to share what they know or learn with the group in order to complete an assigned task. In ESL class, students will have an opportunity to develop "the functional language practice" (Perez & Torres-Guzman, 2002, p. 115) when they are sharing their ideas. However, teachers should be careful to ensure that there is a mix of students with carrying English proficiency in each group.

No matter which methods and approaches are used, teachers should realize that language learning is most effective when it is a means of communicating meaningful information. For instance, learning grammatical forms and structures is not meaningful to young children. However, children are curious about animals and the world around them. For this reason, it is suggested that EFL/ESL teachers organize language instruction around content area subjects. In this way, students will learn content-related information while acquiring English skills, including reading. There are many ways to promote and create an effective learning climate for all students. To benefit them as much as possible, teachers should consider methods that facilitate improved comprehension of language, increased quantity and quality of language production, and greater access to the content curriculum (Chamot & O'Malley, 1986).

## References

Chamot, A. & O'Malley, J. (1986). *A Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach: An ESL Content-based Curriculum*. Roslyn, VA: National Clearinghouse on Bilingual Education.

Chomsky, N. (1997). *The Minimalist Program*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Cummins, J. (1983). Bilingualism and Special Education: Programs and Pedagogical Issues. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 6(4), 373-386.

Elley, W. B. (1991). Acquiring Literacy in a Second Language: The Effect of Book-based Programs. *Language Learning*, 41, 373-411.

Ellis, R. (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Garcia, G. E. (in press). The reading comprehension development and instruction of English Language Learners. In C. Snow & A. Sweet (Eds.), *Reading Comprehension*. Guilford Press.

Gass, S. M., & Selinker, L. (2001). *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hakuta, K. (1990). *Bilingualism and Bilingual Education: A Research Perspective*. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse on Bilingual Education.

Krashen, S. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. London: Longman.

Larsen-Freema, D. & Long, M. (1991). *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*. London: Longman.

Park, G (1994). *Language Learning Strategies: Why do adults need them?* Unpublished manuscript, University of Texas at Austin.

Perego, S. F. & Boyle, O. F. (2001). *Reading, Writing, & Learning in ESL: A Resource Book for K-12 Teachers*. Boston: Addison Wesley Longman.

Perez, B., Torres-Guzman, A. (2002). *Learning in Two Worlds: An Integrated Spanish/English Biliteracy Approach*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Pica, T. (1985). The Selective Impact of Classroom Instruction on Second Language Acquisition. *Applied Linguistics*, 6(3), 214-222.

Vogt, M. E. & Shearer, B. A. (2003) *Reading Specialists in the Real World: A Sociocultural View*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.