

# PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

DOUGLAS BROWN

# **PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING**

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To Mary

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# Preface

For several decades now foreign language teachers have been engaged in scientific approaches to the methodology of foreign language teaching—principled approaches based, in varying degrees, on experimentation and research on linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical foundations. But recent years have brought about a mushrooming of research on second language acquisition. The resulting increase in our knowledge of principles of language learning and teaching has led to a situation in which teacher training programs can no longer present one or two methods and a number of techniques, in “cookbook” fashion, and thereby expect trainees to be adequately prepared to teach a foreign language. The complexity of the process of second language acquisition in all its contexts is becoming apparent as teachers and researchers discover a multiplicity of variables at play.

Teacher trainees must therefore be carefully schooled in an integrated understanding of these many variables so that, when faced with practical teaching contexts, they will be able to make intelligent, informed choices of a particular method or a particular technique for a given set of learners and learning goals in a given context.

*Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* is designed to provide teachers and teacher trainees with a comprehensive and up-to-date grasp of the theoretical foundations of foreign language teaching. No particular foreign language is highlighted since general

principles of language learning are applicable to all languages. Many of the illustrative examples here are in English since that is the language common to all readers of the volume; occasional references are also made to French and Spanish. Techniques and procedures are not within the scope of the book. General approaches and methods are described in Chapter 12, but specific classroom applications are the province of concurrent or subsequent practical training in the teaching of a particular language. The assumption here is that a teacher trainee needs to gain broad but systematic knowledge of the process of second language acquisition in order to effectively understand and adapt teaching techniques.

The text covers a variety of topics as indicated in the Table of Contents. The subject matter is examined from the interdisciplinary perspectives of linguistics, psychology, and education, the three major disciplines which have contributed to language teaching methodology over the past four decades. The plan of the text is, through the chapters, to build toward a comprehensive, integrated understanding of the teaching-learning process, such that one will be able to construct a personalized rationale, or theory, of second language acquisition. This theory-building is the substance of the final chapter.

A spiraling approach is used for presenting material. A concept may be introduced in one chapter but not dealt with substantially until a later chapter. Or a concept may be defined at one point but its significance and implications discussed at a later point. For example, behaviorism is defined in Chapter 1, related to first language learning in Chapter 2, then treated technically in Chapter 4 in reference to learning theories and used as a reference point throughout the rest of the book. The importance of the distinction between rote and meaningful learning is noted in the discussion of first language acquisition in Chapter 2, but is not substantively defined until Chapter 4. Learning theories are summarized in Chapter 4 but the implications of learning theories are evident throughout the volume in almost every chapter. The interrelated nature of aspects of second language acquisition make such spiraling a necessity.

The substance of *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* is clearly not exhaustive. The complexity of second language acquisition makes it necessary here to capture essentials and to weed out a number of considerations which are peripheral. The systematic elimination of certain factors is the product of a particular theoretical stance on the part of the author. Such omissions are ultimately essential for the construction of a theory of second language acquisition: no theory can be comprehensive enough to encompass every possible variable within the system. The content of this book thus



serves not as an encyclopedia but rather as an integrated framework within which a foreign language teacher can operate to formulate an understanding of how people learn foreign languages—and why people sometimes do *not* learn a language.

The text is designed for graduate students or advanced undergraduates who have a general background in the liberal arts. Prior technical knowledge of linguistics or psychology is not necessary. An attempt has been made to build, from the beginning, on what an educated person knows about the world, life, people, and communication. By the last chapter the reader will have been led to an understanding of reasonably sophisticated concepts in linguistics and psychology.

Each chapter is supplemented by *suggested readings* and *topics and questions for study and discussion*. The suggested readings offer brief annotations on possible further reading which could enhance one's understanding of the material in the chapter. The readings consist of a number of key articles and books in relevant subfields of second language acquisition, providing a means of fruitful exploration beyond and beneath the words of this volume. The topics and questions serve two purposes. One is to capsulize and review some of the important topics and issues presented in the chapter. The other purpose is to lead one into a consideration of further issues related to those presented in the chapter and into a refining of concepts whose groundwork has been laid in the chapter. This exploring and refining sometimes takes the form of making practical applications of some of the more abstract or theoretical material presented in the chapter.

To that end it is strongly recommended that the user of this book maintain regular contact with a group—however small—of second language learners. That group may be a class in a foreign language or it may be a conversation or tutorial group that meets, say, once a week. That regular contact with second language learners will provide the opportunity to observe persons engaged in the process of second language learning in a real situation and to put certain principles into practice. Without this regular exposure to second language learners one runs the risk of placing the material in this book into abstract compartments which may not square with reality. The feedback of the real world is an important if not essential facet of building a viable understanding of the second language acquisition process.

*Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* is designed for use in programs for training teachers of any modern language. It can be used as the single textbook for a course on theoretical foundations of language teaching, especially if the suggested readings

and discussion questions are fully utilized. It is also appropriate as a basic text to accompany a second text on methods, techniques, and procedures for the particular language in question. In fact, it is assumed that at some point the teacher trainee will gain instruction in those specific classroom techniques and procedures—an obviously essential component of a teacher training program. What this book does is to undergird those practices. It provides necessary and sufficient foundation stones for building the capacity to understand, evaluate, and perfect language teaching practices.

The book has grown out of graduate courses in the theoretical foundations of language teaching which I have taught at the University of Michigan and the University of Illinois. My first debt of gratitude is therefore to my students—for their insights and experiences, for their questions, and for their enthusiastic search for ultimate answers to the deepest mysteries of language acquisition. I also want to thank those who have read and offered comments on portions of this book in draft versions: Bill Acton, Larry Bouton, Cathy Day, Nina Garrett, Adelaide Heyde, Joan Morley, Kyle Perkins, Greg Strick, and Barry Taylor. Special thanks are given my father, Harry D. Brown, for painstaking scrutiny of the style of the manuscript. For meticulous clerical work I am grateful to Sheila Barnes, Judie Birdsall, Carol Myer, and Deborah Snapp. Finally, thank you, Mary, Stefanie, and Jeff, for putting up with an author in your home for these many months.

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Urbana, Illinois

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# Contents

PREFACE           vii

**1**  
**LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND TEACHING           1**

Language	4
Learning and Teaching	7
Parallel Polarization	9
Putting It All Together	13
Suggested Readings	14
Topics and Questions	15

**2**  
**FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION           16**

Theories of First Language Acquisition	17
Issues in First Language Acquisition	27
Suggested Readings	39
Topics and Questions	39

**3**  
**COMPARING AND CONTRASTING FIRST AND SECOND  
LANGUAGE ACQUISITION           41**

Types of Comparison and Contrast	44
Domains of Comparison and Contrast	45
Issues in First Language Acquisition Revisited	58
Suggested Readings	62
Topics and Questions	62

## 4

**HUMAN LEARNING 64**

Of Mice and Men	65
Classical Behaviorism	67
Neobehaviorism	67
<u>Cognitive Learning Theory</u>	70
Humanistic Psychology	76
Suggested Readings	78
Topics and Questions	78

## 5

**COGNITIVE VARIATIONS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING 80**

Types of Learning	<u>80</u>
Strategies of Learning	83
Styles of Learning	89
Suggested Readings	98
Topics and Questions	98

## 6

**PERSONALITY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING 100**

The Affective Domain	101
Egocentric Factors	103
Transactional Factors	107
Motivation	<u>112</u>
Community Language Learning	116
Suggested Readings	119
Topics and Questions	120

## 7

**SOCIOCULTURAL VARIABLES 122**

Cultural Stereotypes	124
Attitudes	127
Learning a Second Culture	129
Language, Thought, and Culture	139
Suggested Readings	144
Topics and Questions	145

**8****COMPARING AND CONTRASTING TWO LANGUAGES 147**

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis	148
Hierarchy of Difficulty	150
Moderating the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis	157
Suggested Readings	160
Topics and Questions	160

**9****ERROR ANALYSIS—THE STUDY OF LEARNERS' INTERLANGUAGE 162**

Error Analysis	164
Procedures of Error Analysis	167
Sources of Error	172
Issues in Error Analysis	181
Suggested Readings	186
Topics and Questions	187

**10****DISCOURSE ANALYSIS—THE STUDY OF THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE 189**

Registers and Styles	191
Communicative Acts	193
Rules of Conversation	196
Personality Factors	198
Nonverbal Dimensions of Discourse	198
The Notional-Functional Syllabus—Discourse Analysis in the Classroom	202
Suggested Readings	205
Topics and Questions	206

**11****FOUNDATIONS OF MEASUREMENT AND RESEARCH 208**

Language Testing	209
Discrete Point vs. Integrative Testing	217
The Foreign Language Teacher as Researcher	219
Suggested Readings	227
Topics and Questions	227

<b>12</b>		
<b>FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE</b>		<b>229</b>
Applied Linguistics	230	
Language Teaching Methods	239	
Putting Your Theory into Practice	<u>245</u>	245
Suggested Readings	253	
Topics and Questions	254	
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	256	
<b>INDEX</b>	270	

# Language, Learning, and Teaching

Becoming bilingual is a way of life. Every bone and fiber of your being is affected in some way as you struggle to reach beyond the confines of your first language and into a new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting. Total commitment, total involvement, a total physical, intellectual, and emotional response is necessary to successfully send and receive messages in a second language. Second language learning is not a set of easy steps that can be programmed in a quick do-it-yourself kit. No one can tell you “how to learn a foreign language without really trying.” The learning of a second language is a complex process, involving a seemingly infinite number of variables. So much is at stake that academic courses in foreign languages are usually pitifully inadequate training grounds, in and of themselves, for the mastery of a second language. Few if any people learn a foreign language fluently within the confines of the foreign language classroom. In fact, it may be that very few aspects of a foreign language can actually be taught!

It may appear contradictory, then, that this book is about both learning and teaching. But some of the contradiction is removed if you look at the teaching process as the facilitation of learning, in which you can “teach” a foreign language successfully if, among other things, you know something about that intricate web of variables that are spun together to affect how and why you learn or fail to learn a second language. Where does a teacher begin the quest

for an understanding of the principles of foreign language learning and teaching? By first asking some questions.

*Who?* Who does the learning and teaching? Obviously, the learner and the teacher. But who is this learner? Where does he\* come from? What is his native language? level of education? socioeconomic level? Who are his parents? What is his intellectual capacity? What sort of personality does he have? There are hundreds of other questions that could be asked, but these will do for starters. These questions, if addressed carefully, focus attention on some of the crucial variables affecting both the learner's success in mastering a foreign language and the teacher's capacity to enable the learner to achieve that mastery. The chapters that follow will help to tease out those variables.

In the case of the teacher, another set of questions emerges. What is the teacher's native language? experience and/or training? knowledge of the second language and its culture? philosophy of education? personality characteristics? Most importantly, how do the teacher and the student interact with each other as human beings engaged in linguistic communion?

*What?* No simpler a question is one that probes the nature of the subject matter itself. What is it that the learner must learn and the teacher teach? What is language? How can the second language be described adequately? What are the linguistic differences between the first and the second language? These profound questions are of course central to the discipline of linguistics. The language teacher needs to understand the system and functioning of the second language and differences between the first and second language of the learner. It is one thing for a teacher to speak and understand a language and yet another matter to consciously understand and explain the system of that language—its phonemes and morphemes and words and sentences and discourse structures.

*How?* How does learning take place? How can a person insure success in language learning? What cognitive processes are utilized in second language learning? What kinds of strategies and styles does the learner use? What is the optimal interrelationship of cognitive, affective, and physical domains for successful language learning?

*When?* When does second language learning take place? One of the key issues in second language research and teaching is the differential success of children and adults in learning a second language. Common observation tells us that children are "better" language learners than adults. Is this true? If so, why does the age of learning

\*In cases in which the use of both third-person pronouns (he/she, her/his) is cumbersome, I have used the masculine form; but where possible, I have tried to avoid any sexist stereotyping.



make a difference? How is a second language learned by a preschool child, still very much involved in the acquisition of his first language? Or by a preadolescent who has virtually mastered his first language and is now embarking on the second? Or by a teenager with the insecurities and ego identification dynamics involved in that period of life? Or an adult who is affectively and cognitively mature? Other *when* questions center around the amount of time spent in the activity of learning the second language. Is the learner exposed to three or five or ten hours a week in the classroom? Or a seven-hour day in an immersion program? Or twenty-four hours a day totally submerged in the culture?

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

*Why?* Finally, the most encompassing of all questions: Why is the learner attempting to acquire the second language? What are the learner’s purposes? Is he instrumentally motivated, seeking a successful career or fulfilling a foreign language requirement? Or is the learner integratively motivated, wishing personally to identify closely with the culture and people of the target language? Beyond these two categories, what other affective, emotional, personal, or intellectual reasons does the learner have for pursuing this gigantic task of learning another language?

These questions have been asked, in very global terms, to give you an inkling of the diversity of problems that can be posed in the quest for understanding the principles of language learning and teaching. And while you cannot hope to find final answers to all the questions, or even some of the questions, you can begin to achieve some tentative answers as you move through the chapters of this book. Or you can hone the global questions into finer, subtler questions, which in itself is an important task, for often being able to ask the right questions is more valuable than possessing storehouses of knowledge.

Thomas Kuhn (1970) referred to “normal science” as a process of puzzle solving in which part of the task of the scientist, in this case the teacher, is to discover the pieces, and then to fit the pieces together. Many of the pieces of the language-learning puzzle are not

yet discovered, and the careful defining of questions will lead to finding those pieces. We can then undertake the task of fitting the pieces together into a “paradigm”—an interlocking design, a theory of second language acquisition.

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

In order to begin to define further questions and to find answers to some of those questions, this first chapter addresses some fundamental issues which form essential foundations of an integrated understanding of second language acquisition. These issues are: what is *language*, and how do persons *learn* and *teach* language?

## LANGUAGE

To presume to define *language* simply would be sheer folly. Linguists and philologists have been trying for centuries to define the term. A definition is really a condensed version of a theory, and a theory is simply—or not so simply—an extended definition. Yet second language teachers clearly need to know generally what sort of entity they are dealing with and how the particular language they are teaching fits into that entity.

Suppose you were stopped by a reporter on the street and in the course of an interview about your vocational choice you were asked: “Well, since you are a foreign *language* teacher, would you define *language* in a sentence or two?” Nonplused, you would no doubt dig deep into your memory for a typical dictionary-type definition of language. Such definitions, if pursued seriously, could lead to a lexicographer’s wild-goose chase, but they also can reflect a reasonably coherent synopsis of current understanding of just what it is that linguists are trying to study. Consider the following definitions of *language* found in dictionaries and introductory textbooks:

Language is a system of arbitrary, vocal symbols which permit all people in a given culture, or other people who have learned the system of that culture, to communicate or to interact (Finocchiaro 1964:8).

Language is a system of communication by sound, operating through the organs of speech and hearing, among members of a given community, and using vocal symbols possessing arbitrary conventional meanings (Pei 1966:141).

Language is any set or system of linguistic symbols as used in a more or less uniform fashion by a number of people who are thus enabled to communicate intelligibly with one another (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language* 1966:806).

Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication (Wardhaugh 1972:3).

[Language is] any means, vocal or other, of expressing or communicating feeling or thought . . . a system of conventionalized signs, especially words, or gestures having fixed meanings (*Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* 1934:1390).

[Language is] a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* 1961:1270).

Still other common definitions found in introductory textbooks on linguistics include the concepts of (1) the generativity or creativity of language, (2) the presumed primacy of speech over writing, and (3) the universality of language among human beings.

Many of the significant characteristics of language are capsulized in these definitions. Some of the controversies about the nature of language are also illustrated through the restrictions that are implied in certain definitions. Finocchiaro, Pei, and Wardhaugh, for example, restrict themselves to the notion of vocal symbols, while both of the *Webster's* definitions include more than merely vocal symbols as the proper domain of language. Finocchiaro, *Random House*, and Wardhaugh restrict their definitions to human language, thereby implying that animal communication and language are essentially different.

A consolidation of the definitions of language yields the following composite definition.

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

These eight statements provide a reasonably concise “twenty-five-words-or-less” definition of language. But the simplicity of the eightfold definition should not be allowed to mask the sophistication of linguistic endeavor underlying each concept. Enormous fields and