*Second Language Myths, Applying second language research to classroom teaching* by Steven Brown and Jenifer Larson-Hall

Following are my notes and application or plans for application.

*Myth 1: Children learn languages quickly and easily while adults are ineffective in comparison.*

*Notes*

This chapter basically refutes the Critical Period Hypothesis.

We must consider the advanced cognitive abilities of adults compared to children; this is one advantage adults have. Children do learn their first language well, but it takes 4 years.

Note: BICS (Basic Intercommunication Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency); CALP takes longer to acquire. (p.9)

A survey of missionaries found that most adults who are exposed to a language in a naturalistic context are able to become quite fluent and proficient speakers after 18-24 months. (p.10)

However, children are more accurate language learners in the long run when they have large amounts of input (p.15). Nevertheless, research also indicates that children do not acquire language more quickly than adults and with enough time to devote to acquisition adults can learn language to a high level of proficiency. (p.16) Furthermore, current research indicates that adults’ brains are still malleable (the brain like a sponge theory for children can apply to adults too!).

*Application*

1. A consistent thought I had throughout this chapter was that I need to dispel this myth with my older ESL students. In particular I had in mind one student who actually expressed the myth to me and talked about her sister who is much younger than her and although they moved to the US at the same time is much better at English. My student believes this is because her sister was a child and thus naturally more capable of learning a second language. I didn’t disagree with the student because I also believed the myth! Now, I will have a response ready when a situation like this occurs in the future. I think this will instill more confidence and self-motivation in students who believe it is a foregone conclusion that they will never attain proficiency.
2. I will think of how adults bring experience to their language learning as well an ability to learn rules.
3. I will always keep in mind that adults *can* learn new languages---age is not a major factor. I will remind students of this and encourage them. Adults should not feel handicapped by the false concept that their brains cannot change. Simply put, if adults want to learn a new language they have the ability to do so.
4. I must also, however, set realistic expectations for how long it can take for adults to reach a high level of ability and remind the students that language acquisition does not happen in one semester; in fact, it’s a life-long process (that should be enjoyed!). Therefore, students should not feel like they are failures if by the end of the semester they don’t feel they have mastered the language. (It takes at least 1,000 hours to become an intermediate speaker of almost any language).
5. Finally, from this chapter it is evident that the more contact hours/exposure to the language the better. I’m seeing the role of the current ALC and perhaps a future ESL conversation center as very important.

*Myth 2: A true bilingual is someone who speaks two languages perfectly.*

*Notes*

Perfectly blended bilinguals are probably non-existent (p.22). Note that there is no board to certify anyone as a “true” bilingual, nor is there a standardized meaning that entails a precise definition of proficiency in one or both languages. (p.23)

Receptive bilinguals are, for example, children who speak the community language at school, etc., e.g., English and their parent(s) speak Spanish to them at home (but they respond in English) (p.25).

Another category of is the late bilingual, i.e., adults who have acquired a new language (p.26).

Bilinguals actually outnumber monolinguals globally, i.e., it is the norm not the exception (p.27).

Another misconception is that being raised bilingually means slower progress in both languages (p.29).

The research indicates certain advantages to bilingualism, not only personal and economic:

* Stronger symbolic representation and abstract reasoning skills
* Stronger control of attention in both linguistic and nonverbal tasks
* Better learning strategies
* Enhanced problem-solving skills
* Enhanced creativity and divergent thinking skills
* Greater cognitive flexibility

*Application*

1. As the authors mention, educators should provide extra help for bilinguals. This is where extra support at the college is vital, e.g., through tutoring.
2. I was very encouraged by the authors’ suggestion that adults should learn another language. They highlight three major benefits: keeping the brain active, being able to communicate with a larger portion of the world, and being more sympathetic to language learners in general. I actually think all ESL teachers should learn another language, even if it is only to recognize the difficulties involved in second language acquisition and therefore become more empathetic towards students. It is my goal to regain English-Spanish bilingualism and learn French.

*Myth 3: You can acquire a language simply through listening or reading.*

*Notes*

According to the research we need all three factors of input, output, and interaction to learn a language; in fact, we probably need more (p.38).

It is useful to review Krashen’s Comprehension Hypothesis (actually 5 hypotheses).

* Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis: acquisition is implicit/subconscious while learning is explicit/conscious.
* Natural Order Hypothesis: we acquire the rules to a language in a set order that is not amenable to change through instruction.
* Monitor Hypothesis: learned knowledge is the monitor or the editor while acquired language is at the heart of competence.
* Affective Filter Hypothesis: the acquirer has to be able to accept input (feel comfortable)
* Input Hypothesis: humans acquire knowledge in only one way, by comprehending messages (input) at a level slightly higher than they are able to understand (*i + 1*).

This is a comprehension approach where traditional methods of teaching grammar are emphasized. Many, however, argue that Krashen’s ideas are not sufficient to explain second language acquisition (p.40).

Conversation group work: Native Speakers grouped with Non-Native Speakers (NS/NNS) aren’t necessarily better than NNS/NNS; in fact, the research indicates that there are many advantages to NNS/NNS (p.44), i.e., students’ target language doesn’t get worse just because they’re speaking with NNS.

Note that Krashen and colleagues have largely operationalized “comprehensible input” as extensive reading (p.44). However, the authors reject any sweeping conclusions regarding the effectiveness of ER. More reading leads to reading improvement as well as grammar and vocabulary. Also, contrary to Krashen, listening practice improves listening but is not sufficient for speaking improvements---for that you need to speak! This makes sense…the author seems to be reinforcing his point that we need all aspects of input and output exposure and practice.

Interestingly, the author claims that the explicit teaching of grammar has a positive effect on acquisition (p.48).

Other studies find that interaction is as good as or better than input alone (p.48).

Tasks in which students interacted with each other show gains in language learning (p.49).

Giving learners an opportunity to produce output can lead to acquisition (p.52).

Swain’s comprehensible output hypothesis was based on a study of the Canadian immersion program where students received massive amounts of comprehensible input but not much output. This was partly due to the fact that content was being taught, not language. The results were that students had excellent comprehension skills but were not very good producers of the language. Swain argued that what was missing from immersion programs was comprehensible output (or pushed output) (p.53).

The conclusion of this chapter is that input is a necessary but insufficient means of language acquisition. Interaction is also necessary, but so is (pushed) output, i.e., when students are pushed to give better output. Therefore, input, output, and interaction all have a place in the classroom.

*Application*

The goal for teaching seems to be making input comprehensible and constructing effective speaking tasks.

1. To make input comprehensible, always do a pre-listening or pre-reading task.
2. Use effective interaction activities. One example, from the book is to create two-way tasks, i.e., collaborative activities that involve working out a puzzle or solving a problem where communication is necessary to reach the desired outcome. For example, instead of asking pairs to discuss how to celebrate New Year’s ask instead to list three differences in how you and your partner celebrate New Year in your own family. Also, remember that mixing partners is key.
3. Monitor pair work and group work. Studies show that appropriate intervention to produce more accurate output helps students. Also, I will be more aware of general common errors and turn these into mini-lessons.

*Myth 4: Practice Makes Perfect*

*Notes*

The idea of “noticing” forms of the second language is seen as important (p.61). Noticing is the first step in language building according to Schmidt (this theory has been criticized for lack of empirical evidence that noticing in fact assists acquisition; however, other studies, e.g., Leow, 2000 seem to support it).

Noticing may occur in two ways: learners notice a gap in their knowledge (a word they need but don’t know) or they may notice a gap between what they produce and what a more competent user of the language produces (p72).

Note Van Patten’s (2007) argument: comprehension is necessary for acquisition; acquisition depends on learners making connections between forms and meaning (p.64).

Output has four functions: production, hypothesis testing, reflection, and noticing (p.72).

*Application*

1. Don’t be afraid to do an activity more than once. Just because I think it might be boring, the students don’t necessarily think so; they want to become proficient. The key is to do communicative activities and change partners.
2. I really liked the dictogloss idea (p.78). I’ve used variations of this, but I liked the simplicity of this approach. I will use this in Conversation class and perhaps adapt it for all ESL courses I teach.

*Myth 5: Language students learn (and retain) what they are taught.*

*Notes*

Research indicates that students are not learning what their teachers are trying to teach them (not just in language classes).

Research also shows that a general rule exists for learning new knowledge: students need active participation in constructing his or her own knowledge. For language this means actively using the language itself rather than simply learning about it (p.84).

Krashen is against the idea of teaching grammar explicitly, following the theory that grammar will be picked up along the way, i.e., implicitly (p.85). On the other hand, others believe grammar teaching is useful, following the theory that eventually the explicit rule becomes automatized.

Weighing up the evidence, the authors seem to believe that grammar teaching only has a short-term effect (p.95). However, there is value in teaching grammar explicitly and it also seems to learners’ progress through developmental stages.

How students do seem to learn: Developmental Sequences (p.95). What this means for teaching is that although a teacher may teach a grammatical form student will not be able to learn the correct form all at once (p.100). They will need to practice and progress will be slow.

**Students need to spend more time in class actually using the language instead of listening to lectures about it.** (p.100)

Regarding vocabulary: research indicates that (contra Krashen) using word lists and explicitly linking second language vocabulary to first language translations is an excellent way to learn vocabulary (p.101) and using the vocabulary in an interactive task helps learners to actively use the new words. Also important is the number of times learners hear of use the words (frequency matters) (p.102).

*Application*

1. This chapter certainly supports the policy of having focused courses in an ESL program. For example, if it is true that learners often do not learn what teachers teach them, then they certainly will not learn what we *don’t* teach them, like, for example, vocabulary. This is a good argument for offering grammar, vocabulary, and conversation classes.
2. Help students understand that to learn a complex subject area such as language is no easy task.
3. It’s okay to teach grammar explicitly, but recognize the limitations of doing so. In grammar class spend as much time as possible allowing students to actively construct language and don’t expect the students to perform perfectly on the grammar being taught. Also, repeat problematic grammar.
4. Recent research is looking at the effects of teaching “chunks of language,” like phrases, e.g., *I’ve been living in Utah for two year*. This can help with fluency.

*Myth 6: Language learners always benefit from correction*

*Notes*

Some experienced teachers have noticed that providing sustained feedback in the communicative situation seems to be more effective in promoting the long-term correct usage of a particular language feature. In fact, adding humor makes this process gently and even more effective. Also, it is important to choose your battles, i.e., don’t react to every error (p.107).

The literature says that haphazard error correction (spoken or written) is not effective.

Interestingly, the recast method of correcting is very common but not very effective.

Example:

Student: *He gave me many advices*.

Teacher: *Oh, that’s helpful; he gave you a lot of advice.*

Often, the learners don’t pick up on the hint. Mostly advanced learners do best with this type of correction. However, recasts don’t push the learners to generate repairs for themselves (p.109). Prompts are better, e.g., *E.g., What do you mean? I don’t understand, could you repeat?* Also, repeating the incorrect sentence and stressing the error.

Here are the conclusions from research on oral feedback.

* Feedback can help learners to improve their spoken grammar if it is given on a focused grammatical point.
* Causing learners to notice and then repair their own ungrammatical utterance by using prompts is more effective than recasting.
* Focused grammatical correction over time through communicative activities (not drills) are more effective.

In written feedback we need to be consistent and thorough. Asking students to revise is key to them actually paying attention to the corrections (p.116). Not all errors need to be corrected.

*Application*

1. I was glad to hear that written feedback on grammar errors is useful, especially if the students have to write drafts. I’ll continue to do this keeping in mind that I don’t have to correct all errors and that I should try focus on a specific problem area and provide a rule for students to follow.
2. Consistent correction over time is more effective using explicit types of correct like prompts rather than recasting. (This is especially true for lower levels).
3. I like the goal of making students more self-sufficient in finding errors on their own. I will think of activities to do this.

*Myth 7: Individual differences are a major, perhaps the major, factor in SLA*

*Notes*

Good question: how do learning styles, personality, anxiety, aptitude, motivation, and willingness to communicate affect language learning? (p.122)

Cognitive styles: the ways people approach problem-solving, thinking, and remembering. Learning styles: the ways in which people approach learning (p.123).

Aptitude: research indicates that foreign language learners who have stronger skills in their L1 are more successful and proficient in L2 (p.131).

Motivation: Gardner’s seminal theory is a socio-educational model that sees language achievement linked to five factors.

1. Integrativeness, i.e., openness to and interest in other cultures and languages
2. Attitudes towards the class, teacher, learning situation, etc.
3. Motivation: effort, goals, and reactions to success or failure.
4. Integrative Orientation: a desire to join the target language group in some way.
5. Instrumental Orientation: a focus on external reasons, e.g., grades or exams.

However, it is difficult to say whether individual differences are the deciding factor in SLA.

*Application*

1. It may be a good idea to think more in terms of self-directed learning for students. Some simple ways to incorporate this without drastically changing the curriculum to a self-directed language learning model: teach learners how to learn (metacognition), e.g., study skills; choice in reading materials; individualized conversation, listening, or writing activities.
2. I can think about trying to provide something for everyone. Probably the best way to do this is to vary activities (something I’ve found tends to keep everyone more engaged).
3. Classroom atmosphere is crucial (lowering the affective filter). Heraclitus said you never step in the same river twice. The same is true for classes; every class is different and adapting to the dynamics and needs of each class is essential for success.

*Myth 8: Language acquisition is the individual acquisition of grammar*

*Notes*

For many, the concept of piling up bits of language or learning about language is equated with language acquisition. This is false. Part of the problem is the relative lack of a communicative approach to language teaching.

Note Chomsky’s theory of grammar, which has been very influential: the ability to learn language is innate, distinctly human, and distinct from all other aspects of human cognition.

Note: the authors emphasize in this book the overall myth that SLA is synonymous with individual’s acquisition of morphosyntax (p.147).

Exposure to L2 without instruction allows learners a certain level of acquisition, but it takes a long time. Instruction can make a difference, especially if it allows plenty of opportunities for practice (p.148).

Other areas in this section for future research: emergentism, cognitive linguistics, connectionism, sociocultural theory, language socialization, and identity.

*Application*

1. I need to keep in mind that communicative competence goes beyond grammar (although as mentioned above, grammar is still important). It is useful to consider the following model of communicative competence: (a) grammatical competence (b) sociolinguistic competence (c) strategic competence.
2. I like group work and the book emphasizes how this can help develop the social part of the classroom. (I was aware of this, but it’s nice to see it in the research).
3. Service Learning is a HIP and could be used for ESL students to engage in the community and learn important language skills. I’m going to talk to Lucy Smith! Activities that bind students to each other and to the outside world are worth exploring.