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Crossing Boundaries: What Do Second-Language- Learning Theories Say To Reading and Writing Teachers of English-as-a-Second-Language Learners?

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Abstract

Increasing presence of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners in United States schools creates more and more need for all teachers, including mainstream teachers, reading teachers, and other specialists, to have a firm understanding of some basic principles and beliefs about how individuals learn a second language. Teachers who have been trained in foreign-language education, bilingual education, ESL education, and related fields — such as linguistics — usually have learned about predominant second-language-learning theories and their correlated instructional implications.



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Increasing presence of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners in United States schools creates more and more need for all teachers, including mainstream teachers, reading teachers, and other specialists, to have a firm understanding of some basic principles and beliefs about how individuals learn a second language. Teachers who have been trained in foreign-language education, bilingual education, ESL education, and related fields — such as linguistics — usually have learned about predominant second-language-learning theories and their correlated instructional implications. However, other teachers generally have very little acquaintance with the theories. Consequently, they often have lingering questions about how ESL students learn orality and literacy and about how to help ESL learners develop English orality and literacy. In this article, first, two theoretical positions are briefly discussed which shed light on learning across languages and about how languages are related. Second, two major theories are described about how a second language is learned, and

implications for ESL-literacy learning are presented along with exemplative classroom scenarios. Finally, a summary of important points for teachers is given.

Second-language/first-language learning

Two theoretical positions, supported by empirical research, help us to understand two extremely important points about second language learning. The two points are: the *way* a second language is learned is highly similar to the way a first language is learned, and *what* is learned in one language is shared in the second (Hakuta, 1986; Krashen, 1991; Snow, 1992). The first theory (Chomsky, 1980) suggests that ability to learn any language (first, second, etc.) is innate and that each of us, all over the world, has something called a "universal grammar" built into our minds to allow us to learn language. Importantly, the "universal grammar" works for any language. So generally speaking, all language learning tends to happen in the same way.

The second position is called the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) Model of how two languages are related (Cummins, 1978; 1979). It posits that a common set of proficiencies underlies both the first and second languages. That is, if you learn something in one language, it will transfer to another language. Also, using a skill or strategy in one language is pretty much the same process as in another. An important feature of the CUP Model is that major literacy skills thought to be the same in both languages have been identified, including conceptual knowledge, subject-matter knowledge, higher-order thinking skills, and reading strategies.

It is crucial that teachers of ESL students know these two theoretical positions. As a teacher of teachers, I am often asked by preservice and inservice teachers about whether ESL students learn English in some special way. On numerous

occasions classroom and reading teachers have said to me, "I'm just at a loss as to what to do to teach my ESL kids about reading and writing." When included in literacy instruction, the positions just presented imply that, on the whole, the sound literacy-instruction practices teachers already use to teach native-English speakers, can be used with ESL learners.

Second-language learning theories

There are several theories on second-language learning, two of which dominate the field today — the Monitor Model and Cognitive Theory (McLaughlin, 1984). It is important to note that a third theory, Interlanguage Theory, is perhaps the most favored by second-language researchers. However, because few practical classroom implications (for either orality or literacy) have been drawn from the theory, I will not present it here.

The Monitor Model

The most well known, and perhaps the most widely cited, theory of second-language learning is Krashen's Monitor Model (Krashen, 1977; 1981; 1982; 1985; Krashen and Terrell, 1983). The theory is very popular among United States second-language teachers (Johnson, 1992), although it has been heavily criticized by some second-language researchers and theorists, for example, because supporting data are said to be limited and/or over-interpreted, findings opposed to the theory are ignored, and the theory makes sweeping assertions (Gregg, 1984; McLaughlin, 1978; 1984; 1987; Taylor 1984).

Krashen originally developed the theory primarily to explain second-language orality learning, but he has recently said that second-language literacy develops in a similar way. The model emphasizes the whole learning setting, that is, the linkages between the learner and the environment, or the

linkages between readers and writers. According to the Monitor Model, individuals learn to acquire the new language through efforts to understand and be understood in meaningful situations (Johnson, 1992; Hatch and Hawkins, 1987; Snow, 1991).

The theory is made up of five central hypotheses: Acquisition-Learning, Monitor, Natural Order, Input, and Affective Filter. The *Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis* asserts that second-language learning occurs through two independent means. One is acquisition, which is "a subconscious process identical in all important ways to the process children utilize in acquiring their first language" (Krashen, 1985, p. 1). Acquisition happens through meaningful interaction in a natural setting where speakers are concerned with meaning, not form of talk. The second means is learning — a "conscious process that results in knowing about language" (Krashen, 1985, p. 1). Learning occurs in situations where formal rules and feedback are used for language instruction and where error detection and correction are important. The *Monitor Hypothesis* is that the learner applies language rules to monitor or edit language before or after speaking (or presumably before or after reading or writing) (Krashen, 1982). The *Natural Order Hypothesis* is that the rules of the second language are acquired in a predictable order (Krashen, 1985). An example of a natural acquisition order is that children tend to acquire rules of spelling in predictable patterns. For example, they initially use strings of letters to represent whole sentences. The letters may not bear any identifiable relationship to the words in the sentences. Next, initial sounds of words begin to appear in the strings, and then the spaces occur between letters to mark word boundaries. The *Input Hypothesis* posits that individuals acquire language in only one way — by understanding messages, or by receiving "comprehensible input" (Krashen, 1985).

We move from our current level of ability to the next level gradually by processing only a limited amount of new information (e.g., new vocabulary, new grammar rules). Two important corollaries are these. First, speech (and by extension, literacy) cannot be directly taught. Rather, orality and literacy emerge in naturally communicative settings where individuals cooperatively try to understand one another. Second, if what is heard (or written) is comprehensible and plentiful, the grammar needed for acquisition is automatically provided. That is, the rules of the second language will be acquired naturally through the communicative setting without, for example, grammar, phonics, or spelling instruction. The *Affective Filter Hypothesis* is that there is a filter which sifts emotions, motivations, and other affective features, and can act as a barrier to acquisition. For example, if the student has negative feelings about the new language and the culture associated with it, learning the new language may be harder.

In sum, Krashen believes that second-language learners use two distinct processes to learn the new language. They acquire its rules in the same way children acquire a first language — that is, in a predictable order subconsciously by receiving comprehensible input which passes by an affective filter which facilitates acquisition. Second-language learners also learn about the new language consciously through more formal means of instruction focusing on rules, feedback, and error detection and correction. Finally, a mental Monitor controls the learning.

Extrapolated ESL-literacy instruction guidelines

The main implications for ESL literacy from each of Krashen's five hypotheses are summarized along six dimensions in Table 1. They are:

- Since second-language acquisition is subconscious, error correction in English oral reading or

in writing will not help acquisition. However, teacher-correction of errors may affect conscious second-language learning. Consequently, Krashen implies that error correction should be used judiciously and only for the purpose of helping students to be aware of particular points.

- Formal rules play a limited role in second-language learning. Therefore, English grammar, phonics, and spelling rules should be taught primarily at later stages of second-language learning and only to help learners polish their speech and writing.

- Teachers cannot impose a sequence of language rules, such as spelling patterns, on learners. Therefore, "invented spelling" should be encouraged.

- Since reading and writing results from building competence via plentiful reading and writing of understandable material, phonics and other "subskills" and rules will be acquired through these natural reading/writing contexts. Consequently, more emphasis is placed on implicit rather than explicit teaching.

- Teachers should provide lots of opportunity for English reading, writing, and conversation with interested partners; optimize comprehensible input; optimize the learner's interest in the discourse by selecting interesting and/or relevant topics, such as school subject-area content; and provide opportunities for learners to manage conversation and literacy. Also, Krashen believes that reading in the second language can aid oral progress.

- The teacher can facilitate learners' high-level motivation and self confidence, while simultaneously decreasing anxiety by carefully selecting activities, promoting a "safe" classroom environment, and reflecting a positive, interested demeanor.

Table 1
Comparison of Emphases and Instructional Implications of the Monitor Model and Cognitive Theory

(Emphasis) Dimensions	Monitor Model <i>(The whole learning setting; linkages between environment and learner)</i>	Cognitive Theory <i>(The internal mental processes)</i>
1. Error correction	Use sparingly	--*
2. Place of subskills, strategies (e.g., grammar, phonics, &/or spelling rules)	Taught at later stages & only to help learners "polish"	Taught from early stage on
3. Teacher alteration of learning sequence	Can not be done	Can be done
4. Explicit vs. implicit teaching	More emphasis on implicit teaching	More emphasis on explicit teaching
5. Practice	Lots of it	Lots of it
6. Motivation	Promote a "safe" classroom environment	--*

--* *not a specific focus of the theory*

Classroom illustration. While a single illustration or two can not show implementation of all of the guidelines emanating from a second-language theory, it may reveal some of the most salient aspects and capture the flavor of what classroom ESL-literacy instruction might be like. Here is a composite scenario created to show what instruction consistent with the Monitor Model might look like.

Maria is an ESL student in Ms. Jensen's fourth-grade classroom. They are sitting in a corner of the room. Maria is one of five children in a family which arrived in the United

States from Guatemala just one month ago. Maria's family came to the United States so that her parents and the older siblings could work in a restaurant that her aunt and uncle had already established here. In Guatemala, Maria had attended school irregularly, and had begun to learn to read and write in Spanish. A shy child, she listens attentively in class, but has few friends. Though she seems to understand much of what goes on in class, she seldom speaks with anyone except Ms. Jensen, and even with Ms. Jensen, her words are few. Ms. Jensen and Maria are discussing a piece of writing that Ms. Jensen asked Maria to do last week. She told Maria that she wanted to know more about her and asked her to write about two or three most important things that Ms. Jensen should know. Maria wrote: *I gatamla. hapi hre. 4 bruthr 1 sistr. mothr fathr. wrk rastrt.*

Ms. Jensen asks Maria to read the piece to her, and then the following conversation occurs. Notice the following salient characteristics of the interchange. The "Monitor Model" column in Table 1 highlights these characteristics. First, the emphasis is on conversation about authentic text. The teacher engages Maria in writing and conversation in a casual way, for a real purpose — so that each can learn something about the other. Second, there is no error correction (see Dimension 1 in the table). Third, aspects of Spanish grammar which differ from English grammar show up as negative transfer in Maria's writing. For example, when she says she is happy here, she deletes the word *I*. In Spanish, the pronoun can be inferred from the verb and from context. The teacher is aware of this negative transfer. Notice especially that she only responds by incidentally using the word *I* in her own sentence. She believes that Maria will learn this grammatical rule when she is ready. Consequently, she does not try to explicitly teach her the rule (see Dimensions 2, 3, and 4 in Table 1). Fourth, the teacher interweaves reading and

writing with their conversation so that Maria practices literacy in a meaningful context. In this way, she also teaches implicitly rather than explicitly (see Dimensions 4 and 5 in the table). Fifth, by helping Maria to learn about her and by taking an interest in Maria's own life outside of school, the teacher shows sensitivity to Maria and opens her own personal world to her, thereby increasing the likelihood of creating a connection or bond between them. This effort could lead to increased motivation for Maria to learn (see Dimension 6 in the table).

Ms. J: Maria, tell me, do you mean "I am from Guatemala?" or do you mean "I left Guatemala?" or something else?

Maria: I from Guatemala.

Ms. J: Do you know, Maria, while we talk about what you wrote, I'm going to write something to you. Here.

Ms. J. writes and says simultaneously, "I am from the United States."

Ms. J: Can you read what I wrote?

Maria reads it.

Ms. J: Maria, you say you are happy here. What makes you happy?

M: Like you. Not 'fraid.

Ms. J. writes, "I like you too," and reads it aloud to Maria, pointing to each word.

Ms. J: Tell me, what are your brothers and sisters like? How old are they?

Maria: 20, 19, 17, 16, and 12.

Ms. J: Do they play with you?

Maria: No. They work.

Ms. J: Do you work too?

Maria: Yes.

Ms. J: What do you do at work?

Maria: I give menus.

Ms. J: *That's a big job for a little girl! I used to do that too, but I was 16 when I started. I worked in a restaurant. At first, I worked in the kitchen. Then I helped give out menus. Then I was a waitress.*

Ms. J. writes and reads, "I am married. I have one little girl and one little boy."

Ms. J: *What would you like to know about my family?*

Ms. J continues to try to engage Maria in conversation about each of their families, interjecting reading and writing.

Cognitive theory. Cognitive Theory (McLaughlin, 1987) is narrower in outlook than the Monitor Model. Whereas the Monitor Model addresses the whole learning situation and emphasizes important contexts outside of the learner (e.g., the language supplied by another person), Cognitive Theory focuses more exclusively on internal mental processes of second-language learning. Though more explicitly articulated for orality, some argue that it also applies to literacy, and some research on the theory has been done with literacy situations (McLaughlin, 1984).

Simply stated, Cognitive Theory posits that a learner acquires a second language through gradual accumulation of subskills (McLaughlin, 1987). In the theory, the term *subskills* has a special meaning. *Subskills* are procedures — for example, strategies for selecting appropriate vocabulary; grammatical rules; knowing how to open and close a fairy tale in a composition; and knowing conventions of various social settings such as greeting strangers and introducing oneself. At first, the learner has to concentrate on, and think about, the subskills — but with time, thought and concentration are not required. For example, in a hierarchy for writing setting a goal would be a higher order skill, followed by choosing a topic. Subskills would include recalling and choosing words, using

appropriate syntax, and so on (Levelt, 1978). When a component of the task becomes automatic, the learner's attention is freed to be devoted to other aspects of the task. Importantly, automaticity is achieved through practice. Additionally, as more learning happens, the learner's mental array of concepts and rules change.

Extrapolated ESL-literacy guidelines

Implications of Cognitive Theory for ESL-literacy instruction include the following.

- Educators should teach subskills, such as strategies for recognition of grammar, phonics, and spelling patterns, or how to recognize organizational patterns in text.
- Teachers can facilitate ESL learners' changing cognitions by gradually introducing higher-level thinking procedures and tasks; that is, they can alter the natural learning progression. For instance, in reading, teachers might slowly move learners into more difficult texts while increasingly asking more complex questions, such as questions about causality (e.g., "Why did the main character do that?").
- Further, teachers can enhance student progress by explicitly teaching subskills or strategies.
- Plenty of opportunity for practice is essential for automaticity.

Table 1 shows how these implications compare to the implications from the Monitor Model along four of the dimensions.

Classroom illustration. Here is an example showing how Ms. Petersen, a teacher whose beliefs are more aligned with Cognitive Theory, might interact with Maria, the ESL student depicted in the earlier classroom illustration. While a

similar assignment is given and some of the same conversation and activity take place, there are at least three pivotal modifications in the scenario. The "Cognitive Theory" column in Table 1 highlights points about these changes. First, even though Maria is in the early stages of learning English, Ms. Petersen teaches her a specific subskill, the grammar rule that the pronoun *I* must be stated (see Dimension 2 in the table). Second, by trying to teach the grammar rule, Ms. Petersen shows that she believes she can intervene in the natural order of learning grammar rules (see Dimension 3). Third, notice especially how Ms. Petersen explicitly teaches the grammar rule by showing the correct form, reading it aloud, asking Maria to repeat it, and then at the end of the lesson, summarizing the rule (see Dimension 4).

Ms. P: Maria, tell me, do you mean "I am from Guatemala?" or do you mean "I left Guatemala?" or something else?

Maria: I from Guatemala.

Ms. P: Maria, here's how we say and write that in English.

Ms. P. writes and says "I am from Guatemala."

Ms. P: Can you read what I wrote?

Maria reads it.

Ms. P: Maria, you say you are happy here. We write it like this, "I am happy here." Can you read it?

Maria reads it.

Ms. P: Maria, what makes you happy?

Maria: Like you. Not 'fraid.

Ms. P: We say and write it like this, "I like you. I am not afraid." Can you read it?

Maria reads it.

Ms. P: Tell me, what are your brothers and sisters like? How old are they?

Maria: 20, 19, 17, 16, and 12.

Ms. P: Do they play with you?

Maria: No. They work.

Ms. P: *Do you work too?*

Maria: *Yes.*

Ms. P: *What do you do at work?*

Maria: *I give menus.*

Ms. P: *That's a big job for a little girl! I used to do that too, but I was 16 when I started. I worked in a restaurant. At first, I worked in the kitchen. Then I helped give out menus. Then I was a waitress. Do you know what "waitress" means?*

Maria: *The person brings food.*

Ms. P: *Yes, that's right. Now Maria, there's something important we've talked about today that I want to make sure to say. Let's look at the sentences we wrote together again.*

Ms. P. *reads and points to the words. "I am from Guatemala. I am happy here. I like you. I am not afraid."*

Ms. P: *Do you see that each sentence has the word "I" — in English we say "I am" or "I" each time we talk about ourselves. In Spanish, you don't need the word "I" each time. In English, you do.*

Final points

What then have we gained as teachers of reading and writing from these theories of how a second language is learned? First, certain positions suggest that ESL students learn English orality and literacy in much the same way that native-English speakers learn them and that what is learned in one language will be shared in another. This understanding lays a critical foundation for teachers because it suggests that we can, on the whole, use the sound literacy-instruction practices we use with native-English speakers when we teach ESL students.

Next, second-language-learning theories do lead to some important guidelines for teaching reading and writing to ESL

learners. One guideline common to both the Monitor Model and Cognitive Theory is that abundant practice in reading and writing is extremely important. However, the instructional guidelines differ considerably from one theory to the other. The differences may be simplified by saying that the Monitor Model represents somewhat more of a top-down stance to learning, whereas Cognitive Theory represents more of a bottom-up stance. That is, Krashen takes the position that lower-level features or subskills of reading and writing will grow naturally out of meaningful encounters with text. He suggests that top-level features, such as meaning making, take precedence. On the other hand, cognitive theorists tend to suggest that the lower-or bottom-level features will add up to the higher-level meaning. Key differences in instructional manifestations of these positions are that, as compared to teachers who embrace the Monitor Model, cognitivists would appear to teach more subskills and strategies, such as grammar and phonics, and how to make grammatical decisions and figure out unknown words earlier in the learning process. They might feel the natural sequence of rule learning can be altered through teacher intervention, and might rely more on explicit or direct teaching.

How should teachers choose between theoretical positions and accompanying instructional implications? Or should teachers select instructional options from both theories and try to combine them? In making decisions, it is probably helpful to understand that the differences in instructional approaches extrapolated from the second-language theories are not unlike differences involved in contemporary debates in the literacy field in general. Many (though not all) instructional implications of the Monitor Model tend to coincide reasonably well with whole-language and process-writing approaches which emphasize the whole learning setting and linkages between readers and writers. On

the other hand, the instructional implications of Cognitive Theory seem generally more aligned with other positions which focus more on the importance of direct or explicit teaching of phonics and other skills and strategies.

In short, there is no definitive answer as to whether the instructional actions derived from the Monitor Model or from Cognitive Theory are more effective for ESL learners. Just as there is little research with native-English speakers comparing and contrasting whole-language or process-writing to other approaches, there is little research with ESL learners comparing and contrasting various reading and writing approaches. In fact, very little literacy-instruction research has been done with ESL learners.

Consequently, teachers can either choose one theory and its accompanying set of instructional implications, or they can select and meld together aspects of each theory and its implications. Teachers who feel the Monitor Model is more compatible with their own world view of learning and literacy instruction, might find texts such as *Whole Language for Second Language Learners* (Freeman and Freeman, 1992) especially useful. Teachers who find Cognitive Theory more consonant with their views might find new explicit-strategy-instruction ideas in materials such as Carrell's (1988) chapter in *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading*.

My own inclination is to try to meld aspects of the two theories. Since they emphasize different features of ESL-literacy learning, I think instructional selections can be made which are coincident with strengths of each theory's emphasis. For example, the main strength of the Monitor Model is that it focuses on the social, meaning-based, reader-to-writer, teacher-to-learner, aspects of literacy. Instructional derivations from the Monitor Model, such as focusing on meaning,

providing a safe environment, and offering lots of practice in authentic situations, would seem highly likely to help ESL learners build knowledge of reader-writer linkages and the importance of reading and writing for meaning. On the other hand, the main strength of Cognitive Theory is that it focuses on the internal mental processes involved in reading and writing. Thus its associated instructional implications centering on early intervention which focuses on mental literacy skills and strategies would seem likely to help ESL learners acquire important cognitive procedures.

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