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**SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION PRINCIPLES RELEVANT TO
THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING MATERIAL**

**Belo Horizonte
2005**

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“Second Language Acquisition Principles Relevant to The Development of
Language Learning Material”

Valéria Augusta Rocha de Assis Santos

Monografia submetida à banca examinadora designada pelo colegiado do curso de especialização em inglês, como requisito para obtenção do grau de especialista em Inglês, área de concentração ensino de língua Inglesa, aprovada em 13/10/2005, pela banca constituída pelos membros, Vera Lúcia Menezes de Oliveira e Paiva, e Ricardo Augusto de Souza.

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Resumo

A criação de material didático para o ensino de língua inglesa é uma área desafiadora e essencial no campo de ensino e aprendizagem de segunda língua. Há evidências consideráveis que indicam que materiais didáticos bem desenvolvidos, com objetivos claros e relevantes, podem ser a base para a prática da língua em sala de aula, permitir que o professor ensine de forma mais eficiente e, conseqüentemente, facilitar a aprendizagem. Este trabalho concentra-se em elementos cruciais envolvidos na criação de materiais didáticos para a aprendizagem de língua inglesa, e enfatiza a importância da criação de materiais autênticos, impactantes e significativos que poderão reduzir a ansiedade dos aprendizes, fomentar a confiança, considerando os seus diferentes perfis afetivos, estilos de aprendizagens, níveis de proficiência, e os efeitos tardios do ensino. Esse estudo também examinará como os materiais didáticos para ensino de língua inglesa devem encorajar o auto-investimento dos aprendizes, o foco consciente e sub-consciente em aspectos linguísticos, e como tais materiais podem promover uma avaliação formativa e favorecer a aprendizagem. Além disso, essa pesquisa destaca o papel significativo do escritor de materiais didáticos no processo de aprendizagem, especialmente a necessidade de que seja embasado nos princípios e aspectos envolvidos na aquisição de segunda-língua – teorias e resultados de pesquisas atuais – e aplicar tais conhecimentos no desenvolvimento de materiais didáticos criativos, interativos, que contenham um conteúdo que desperte o engajamento e promova a aprendizagem. Finalmente, embora o termo material de ensino e aprendizagem frequentemente se refira ao livro didático, nesse estudo, será usado para referir-se a qualquer mídia que facilite a aprendizagem tais como CDROMs, livros didáticos, áudios e vídeos.

Palavras-chave: Ensino e aprendizagem de segunda língua. Material didático. Princípios da aquisição de segunda língua. Papel do escritor de material didático.

Abstract

English Language learning material creation is a challenging and invaluable field within the area of second language learning and teaching. There is considerable evidence to suggest that well-developed language learning materials developed with clear and relevant objectives should enable teachers to perform more efficiently, providing the basis for the bulk of language practice in class and consequently facilitating learning. This paper will concentrate on crucial elements involved in the creation of English language learning materials including the importance of creating impacting, meaningful and authentic materials which will both foster confidence and reduce learners' anxiety and which consider individual learners' affective profiles, learning styles, proficiency levels, and delayed effects of instruction. This study will examine how language learning materials should encourage learners' self-investment, their conscious or subconscious focus on linguistic features and how such materials should promote formative feedback and maximize learning. Furthermore, this study will highlight the significant role of material writers in the learning process, particularly the requirement on such individuals to gather and retain knowledge of the principles and aspects involved in second language acquisition (including developments in theory and research findings) and to apply such knowledge in developing principled language learning materials which remain creative, interactive, and comprise engaging content that will promote learning. Finally, while the term language-learning material often relate solely to textbooks, in this paper the term will be used to refer to anything which may facilitate language learning including CD ROMs, books, audio and videos.

Keywords: Second language learning. Second language teaching. Material writing. Second language acquisition principles. Material writers' role.

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SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION PRINCIPLES RELEVANT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING MATERIAL

INTRODUCTION

Textbooks and other materials produced for language teaching and learning reflect the authors' own beliefs in and ideas about second language acquisition (SLA). Their experience as teachers and students of a foreign language, together with their conclusions as researchers will all influence and contribute to language learning material writing. Therefore, in order to develop effective language learning and teaching materials, which will provide language learners with maximum opportunities for successful learning, writers must remain informed of advancements in language learning theory, but more importantly, writers must be able to write materials which will embody abstract theory in concrete practice (DUBIN; OLSHTAIN, 1995).

In order to understand the process of applying theory in a practical form, this study will focus on two key issues. Firstly, what writers should be aware of and do in order to be able to "bridge the gap between theory and classroom practice" (BYRD, 1995, p. 85). Secondly, what some of the theories of SLA applicable to the creation of language teaching materials are.

THEORY AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

It is established knowledge that writers must apply cutting edge theories and research findings in the field when producing language teaching and learning materials. Theoretical support is necessary so as to justify each activity suggested in the created material. There have to be objectives and purposes underlying the techniques, activities and tasks, which are not merely based on a writer's assumption of what should be done but on the contrary, which are fruits and conclusions of SLA research and theory. Therefore, it is important for writers to

remain well informed and to use this knowledge as the foundation of their language teaching and learning material.

However, theory itself is not sufficient. Besides having a thorough understanding of language learning theories, “writers need to work from a solid base of classroom experience and awareness of the realities of the classroom interactions of teachers and students” (BYRD, 1995, p. 97). Moreover, writers must be aware of effective classroom practice, and in particular, what may or may not work in actual teaching environments.

When materials are carefully created, they become useful tools which may lead teachers to perform a better job and which may also facilitate learning to proceed. What are then some of the key SLA principles relevant to the creation of language learning and teaching materials?

THEORIES OF SLA AND LANGUAGE TEACHING MATERIALS

Brian Tomlinson (1998) states that language learning and teaching materials should create a considerable impact upon learners so that attention and interest become focused on the material. Language teaching and learning materials should therefore arouse curiosity, stimulate attention and as such, engage learners and subsequently maintain this engagement. When this level of impact is achieved, it increases the likelihood of language content being assimilated.

Such impact can be achieved when the topics and activities are novel and innovative; when presentation is attractive using colors and images; and when the content is interesting and appealing. Monotony should be avoided by varying the format and routine of lessons.

Nevertheless, the success of implementing these methods may vary according to country, culture, learners' age, and learners' characteristics, and as such, what may achieve impact on a particular learner group may be less successful with another. Therefore, in order to create materials most likely to consistently achieve impact, writers should be acquainted with the individual characteristics and profiles of the target learners in order to understand what may best engage their attention. Moreover, given that classrooms are likely to contain students with a wide range of personal characteristics and interests, it is beneficial for writers to offer a degree of choice in order to enable teachers to cope with this diversity, providing teaching and learning material that is beneficial to all students, therefore, enabling students to maximize their individual strengths and potential. Accordingly, the likelihood of achieving impact will be increased if the material provides a variety of topics, texts, and activities.

Besides creating beneficial impact upon learners, what materials present needs to be relevant and meaningful in order to be intrinsically motivating. Or as Patricia Byrd (1995) puts it "textbooks should recognize classroom realities by presenting choices that are likely to be of interest and utility to teachers and their students" (p.120). Nonetheless, how do writers make the teaching points relevant and useful? A simple answer is that what learners learn should be useful in real-life situations. For this reason, writers should link teaching points to learners' interests, goals and to real-life needs so that learners are able to apply what is learnt in class. By doing so, the idea of putting into practice the learning points may help learners to clearly see their achievement of short-term objectives and also stimulate a sense of reward.

However, teachers have an essential role to perform in this process since they can make the activity more meaningful by anchoring the topic or content in the students' existing knowledge, background and individual goals. As a result, students will be readily aware of the content relevance and value of what is being taught, will see it as something important to their

own lives and worth paying attention to and consequently, result in long-term retention and assimilation. In the words of Brown (2001), “meaningful learning will lead toward better long-term retention than rote learning” (p.57).

The concept of utilizing materials which are meaningful to a learner is linked with the idea of authenticity. Brian Tomlinson (1998, p. 13) states that “materials should expose the learners to language in authentic use”. This idea was also supported by Roger and Medley (1988) who suggested that besides controlled activities, language learning materials should include activities which allow students to experience the language as it is used outside the classroom environment. If we want to prepare learners for real-world conversations and to use language as it naturally occurs, then language and activities in the language learning material should provide the students with at least some of the hallmarks of authentic language.

However, the writers should create materials which will expose students to different degrees of authenticity namely planned discourse, semi-planned discourse and unplanned discourse. By way of illustration, if materials were to focus solely on authentic language input, a learner might become frustrated at their inability to understand or produce output of a similar level, and subsequently feel it is too high a standard to attain. Therefore, when developing language learning materials, authentic input should be gradually introduced, writers should establish which level of authenticity is suitable for a particular learner group, writers should make the students aware of the level of authenticity to which learners are being exposed (Rings, 1986), and writers should make sure materials guide the teachers in how the activities should be carried out in ways that will make the most of using authentic input while lowering learners’ frustration (DUNKEL, 1995).

In practical terms, language learning materials can introduce authentic language input in a variety of ways. It may be introduced in the instructions to an activity, in the spoken or written text itself, and finally in suggested activities such as interviews, projects, listening to radio, or watching TV programs. Input should include a variety of actual discourse features, styles, modes, media, and purposes. Nonetheless, in order that learners should not become frustrated and in order to make acquisition possible, authentic input used must be comprehensible (TOMLINSON, 1998).

According to Brian Tomlinson (1998, p. 11), “materials should require and facilitate learner self investment”. That is to say the students should be led to make discoveries for themselves. This accords with Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith (1988) who argue that providing learners with the ability to make efficient use of resources in order to allow these discoveries to be made is one of the key roles of teaching materials.

It appears that learners gain more from the learning activity if they become involved in that activity and invest considerable interest, effort, and attention. Brown (2001) states that “successful mastery of the second language will be due to a large extent to a learner’s own personal investment of time, effort, and attention to second language in the form of an individualized battery of strategies of comprehending and producing the language” (p.60). For this reason, materials should lead students to self-investment by meeting their needs when offering choices of focus and activity, and by supplying students with topics control and by involving the learners in activities which are learner-centered and lead to discoveries.

In addition to being meaningful and relevant, materials should equate to learners’ proficiency levels so that students are ready to acquire the applicable teaching points. Pienemann (1984) suggests that language acquired at one level is considered an essential

prerequisite for the processing of target language at the following level, stating: "The devices acquired at one stage are a necessary building block for the following stage" (p. 201). Pienemann (1985) expanded on this theory by saying that premature instruction can be detrimental and cause learners to make use of erroneous forms. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) also lend support to the theory that classroom input should match the stage of a learner's development, arguing that "certain structures are acquired only when learners are mentally ready for them". Krashen (1982) claims that in order for L2 acquisition to proceed, learners must be exposed to "comprehensible input" that is accessible language data containing language structures that are slightly above the learner's current level, which Krashen refers to as "i+1" .

While Pienemann's and Krashen's theories have been criticized by researchers, most teachers accept that there can be negative effects of premature instruction (Brian Tomlinson, 1998). It can be seen that students often become confused and even start to make incorrect use of language structures which they had previously used without significant problems. Learners may avoid using the more complex forms they have failed to understand and instead try to replace them with more basic forms.

According to Brian Tomlinson (1998), language learning materials can lead students to achieve learning readiness when they provide learners with sufficient opportunities to practice and master the features of the previous stage before introducing them to a new one. Also, when writers adjust input so that it comprises features which are slightly above a learner's actual stage of development, this will lead students to focus attention on these higher-level features of the target language, which have not yet been assimilated, so that learners will subsequently recognize and observe these features in future input.

Following on from this, it may be argued that materials must ensure learners' attention is consciously or subconsciously directed to linguistic forms contained within the input. In other words, materials ought to provide activities which promote raising learners' awareness in relation to specific grammatical items. Brian Tomlinson (1998) states that learners should be made aware of differences between their own interlanguage and the corresponding feature in the target language. Swain and Lapkin (1995) lend support to this hypothesis when they say that:

In producing the L2, a learner will on occasion become aware of (i.e. notice) a linguistic problem (brought to his/her attention either by external feedback (e.g. clarification requests) or internal feedback). Noticing a problem 'pushes' the learner to modify his/her output. In doing so, the learner may sometimes be forced into a more syntactic processing mode than might occur in comprehension (1995, p. 373).

Learners are then encouraged to elaborate explicit knowledge as grammatical features are perceived, so realizing the differences between their output and the relevant input, therefore helping learners "internalize new forms and to improve accuracy of their existing grammatical knowledge" (CHAPELLE, 2001, p. 24).

Nevertheless, consciousness-raising is used to draw learners' attention to unlearnt language features within the current input, while not intending these features to be used immediately within the students' own production. Instead, learners acquire features gradually going through a process of transitional constructions during which performance may oscillate and not be consistent, reorganizing what they are learning and finally being able to correctly perform it consistently. Or as Ellis puts it:

Acquisition follows a U-shaped course of development; that is, initially learners may display a high level of accuracy only to apparently regress later before finally once again performing in accordance with target-language norms. It is clear that this occurs because learners reorganize their existing knowledge in order to accommodate new knowledge. (Ellis, 1997, p.23)

Therefore, language learning material writers should consider that formal instruction can have delayed effects. Material writers must remember that while learners may practice and have first contact with a new feature, they may only recall it in their short-term memory, and only produce it correctly when reminded of it by the teacher. Writers must therefore not forget that time will be essential for students to fully absorb the information they receive.

For this reason, it's recommended that materials frequently recall what has been previously taught, providing learners with sufficient opportunities for practice of and exposure to these features in contextualized communicative contexts. As previously mentioned, it is equally important not to overlook learners' proficiency levels so that they are not led to premature and consequently erroneous production. Besides this, the acquisition of new linguistic features should be tested only when learners have had sufficient time to master and produce confidently these features.

However, it is important to highlight that materials should not overvalue controlled form-based practice. This may be useful to introduce new linguistic features when activities are carefully monitored by teachers and corrective feedback is given on the spot. Notwithstanding, as Ellis states "practice may only facilitate acquisition directly if it is communicative, i.e. meaning-focused in nature" (ELLIS, 1992, p. 98). Ellis also argues that controlled practice has no considerable beneficial effect on accuracy (ELLIS, 1990) and fluency (ELLIS; RATHBONE, 1987).

Therefore, materials should offer plenty of opportunities to use language to achieve communicative purpose, focusing on meaning, instead of supplying only controlled practice. It is essential to bear in mind that students will not always be in the classroom, and materials must

make sure to prepare them to use the target language in real-life situations with automaticity and autonomy. Learners will be required to carry out meaningful tasks in which they will need to share information, negotiate meaning, and interact. Engaging learners in communication makes it possible for them to test their internal hypotheses while struggling to communicate, so that language is created through trial and error. By doing so, learners are likely to automatize their existing knowledge and to develop appropriate strategies for their own learning competence (CANALE; SWAIN, 1980).

It is understood that there is considerable variability in learners' rate of learning and level of achievement. SLA researchers have proposed that this variability may result from a number of different personality features and learning styles said to influence on second language acquisition. Correspondingly, language material writers must consider that learners are individuals with different learning styles, preferences and personal characteristics and so create materials that will cater for the preferences of each kind of learner.

Language learning materials should therefore encompass different learner preferences to allow learning by visual learners (who will profit from written forms and images), aural learners (who learn most easily from hearing the language), kinesthetic learners (who often need to add a physical action to the learning process, such as following instructions), studial learners (who are attentive to the linguistic forms of the target language and are eager to receive immediate corrective feedback), experiential learners (who prefer to use language to get their message across rather than being concerned with accuracy), analytic learners (who prefer to focus on individual parts of language, dissecting and segmenting the language into elements), global learners (who are content to absorb large chunks of language at a time), field-dependent learners (who perceive language globally and learn best from textbooks and in a classroom

environment), field-independent learners (who learn best from material relevant to their own experience and develop autonomous learning strategies) (TOMLINSON, 1998).

A learner may additionally have different preferences for learning styles depending on their learning objectives. For instance, if a learner is taking preparatory classes for an examination, s/he tends to be more studious and analytical. If on the other hand, the same student under different circumstances, such as learning a language with the objective of traveling on vacation, tends to be more global and kinesthetic. Materials should allow for deliberate, creative variation to meet the needs, styles, and goals of each student in the class.

Furthermore, material writers should consider the varying affective profiles of learners. Affective factors relate to the learner's emotional state and attitude toward the target language. "The learner's motives, emotions, and attitudes screen what is presented in the language classroom ... this affective screening is highly individual and results in different learning rates and results" (DULAY; BURT; KRASHEN, 1982, p.19). Research has shown that positive attitudes toward the learning process and motivation correlate with degree of proficiency, which means the more motivated a learner is, the more successful language acquisition may be. Learners whose attitudes towards language-learning are negative, however, may acquire less effectively than those whose attitudes are positive (KRASHEN, 1985, p.7).

Therefore, writers should take into account learners' attitudinal differences and create materials based upon a range of cognitive styles, incorporating various forms of instruction, so that it is diversified (LARSEN-FREEMAN; LONG, 1991) by researching and coordinating with learners' interests, offering choice of different types of text, supplying a choice of different types of activities, providing the option of additional learning activities, continually introducing

variety in order to ensure engaging activities, which encourage learners to talk about their attitudes, feelings and reflections on the learning process, the course and materials (TOMLINSON, 1998).

A primary purpose of language learning materials is to reduce the influence of one of these affective factors which is learner's anxiety and to assist them in feeling at ease. As suggested by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) "The less anxious the learner, the better language acquisition proceeds" (p. 20). Decreasing anxiety is not only a teachers' role but is additionally the responsibility of the writer of language learning materials. This creates additional requirements to be considered by the material writer in order to best make learners feel more comfortable.

Tomlinson (1998) states that in order to lower anxiety, writers should try to achieve "personal contact" with learners and which would be facilitated by "achieving a personal voice". That would mean that the learners would be able to better connect with the writers by seeing the writer's opinions, interests and personality resulting in a more relaxed and comfortable learning environment. Tomlinson also suggests that learners will be more likely to be relaxed and at ease if there is sufficient white space on a page as opposed to a page crammed with too much text, and many activities and images. Learners will additionally tend to be more receptive towards interesting texts, topics and illustrations relating to their own culture, realities, and lives. Moreover, in order to lower learners' anxiety a key purpose of language learning materials should be to assist and support the learning process rather than test learners or place stringent demands on a learner learning speed or level of development. Therefore, language learning materials should in no way hinder learners' self-esteem.

Similarly, materials should foster confidence. Brown (2001) argues that “Learners’ belief that they indeed are fully capable of accomplishing a task is at least partially a factor in their eventual success in attaining the task” (p.62). It is indeed something that can be seen in teachers’ daily practice. The more confident a student is, the more comfortable s/he is to participate and take the chances and risks and by doing so, s/he has more opportunities to practice what is being taught and therefore learns faster. This indicates that “Relaxed and self-confident learners learn faster” (DULAY; BURT; KRASHEN, 1982).

Building confidence does not mean simply providing non-challenging or easy tasks which require very little cognitive processing, and which would not point out the way to a learner’s progress. On the contrary, writers should provide achievable activities which stimulate their thoughts and feelings and engage learners by pushing them slightly beyond their current proficiency level, leading them to use and develop their actual skills (TOMLINSON, 1998).

Therefore, language learning material writers should create learning activities and tasks which demand cognitive and affective processing and stimulates being analytic, creative, evaluative in order to lead learners to a deeper and lasting learning. Materials are to make the most of learners’ capabilities by stimulating both right and left side of the brain and maximizing the brain’s capacity during language learning activities (TOMLINSON, 1998).

As mentioned previously, in order to maximize learning it is required that materials do not propose easy tasks and activities that can be easily accomplished. On the contrary, tasks and activities are to spur mental processing and also stimulate feelings in the learners so that they are engaged intellectually, aesthetically, and emotionally. Learners should “receive the

information through different cerebral processes and in different states of consciousness so that it is stored in many different parts of the brain, maximizing recall” (HOOPER HANSEN, 1992)

Learning can also be intensified when materials integrate the four language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing (ELLIS, 1982). In order to ensure learners’ production in class is as similar as possible to real-life communication, skills should not be segregated as such a model differs from the integrated use of language skills that appears in normal day-to-day communication. One skill reinforces another and therefore learners truly understand how rich communication can be. Integrating skills allows exposure to authentic language use and fosters natural interaction in the language. It additionally makes it possible for teachers to assess students’ improvement in the relevant skills simultaneously.

Another aspect which is believed to bring about modifications and development on the learner language is feedback. Therefore, materials should contain activities which encourage formative feedback. Learners should be given feedback on their performance through focusing on their language purpose and use, which should subsequently result in positive washback. As Brown (2004) states “Informal performance assessment is by nature more likely to have built-in washback effects because the teacher is usually providing interactive feedback” (p.29). Therefore, when learners are unable to accomplish a particular communicative purpose, they may still benefit from formative feedback which confirms areas of strength and pinpoints areas needing further work. Consequently, it is advisable for material writers to ensure that “language production activities have intended outcomes other than just practicing language” (TOMLINSON, 1998, p. 22). In fact, activities should point the way to formative feedback in a way that increases motivation, serves as a milestone of students’ progress, helps learners to retain information and results in positive washback.

CONCLUSION

To conclude there are many factors and principles to be considered in order to develop effective language learning and teaching material. While writers can rely on their intuition and on recent and relevant experience in second language teaching it is equally important that they examine and apply learning principles and procedures recommended by SLA researchers. Undoubtedly basing material preparation in SLA theoretical insights will not only provide a better understanding of what materials should encompass but will also undergird teaching practice and provide learners with maximum opportunities for successful learning.

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