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# Theoretical Perspectives on Learning a Second Language

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While trying to help English as a second language (ESL) students in your writing center, you may have wondered: Why do ESL writers seem to have trouble getting the correct word order? Why do ESL writers need help choosing the right word? Why do they continue to make the same errors time after time? Is there anything teachers or tutors can do to make learning English any easier for ESL students? These are also some of the same questions that drive research in the field known as second language acquisition (SLA), a part of the discipline of applied linguistics. Although second language scholars have not settled the answers to these questions, their theories have provided important background knowledge to help explain the challenges of learning a second language.

I have organized this chapter around four of the major theories of SLA. They will bring you closer to understanding how those students who write in English as their second (or third or fourth) language process a new language, English, in their minds. The theories can be briefly described as follows:[1]

1. Behaviorist: We learn by drill and practice.
2. Innatist: We are hardwired to learn a language.
3. Cognitivist: Learning involves noticing, practicing, and eventually making the skill automatic.
4. Interactionist: Learning takes place mainly through interaction with a more proficient speaker.

This chapter introduces you to these theories and illustrates how they can apply to ESL writers in the context of a tutorial. It is my hope that this knowledge will make you not only a more informed tutor but also one who is more curious about, engaged in, and empathetic to the challenges that ESL writers face.

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## Behaviorist—You Learn by Drill and Practice

Anyone who has ever had to recite multiplication tables or memorize lines for a play knows that repetition can be a helpful strategy for learning new material. When this repetition becomes so automatic that you no longer have to think about it, you have formed a habit. This habit formation is one way to account for second language (L2) learning. In this view, language learning involves

- receiving input (exposure to the new language)
- imitating and practicing it repeatedly (drill)
- getting encouragement (positive reinforcement) for doing it correctly
- eventually, forming associations between words and objects or events.

For example, to use the expression "Bless you" correctly, an L2 learner goes through

1. receiving input (someone teaches her, "Say 'Bless you' when you see someone sneezing" or she sees a person say "Bless you" to someone sneezing)
2. practicing "Bless you" whenever she sees someone sneezing
3. receiving "Thank you" in response, and
4. after many practices, eventually establishing the habit of saying "Bless you" when someone sneezes.

In language teaching, practices such as sentence drills and memorization of sentence patterns are often used to form and strengthen the habit of using the new language correctly. Tutors and other native speakers often use similar drill-and-practice exercises in foreign language classes of their own to establish the new language habits, and errors are corrected immediately so that bad habits will not be developed.

Applying the behaviorist view to SLA, we assume that the language habits of L2 learners' first language (L1) influence their learning of the second language. This assumption is called the *contrastive analysis hypothesis* (CAH), and it states that learners have an easier time learning a second language when it is structurally similar to their first language, and that they have a more difficult time when the two are substantially different.[2] Here is a conversation between a tutor, Joe, and an L2 learner, Maria, about an error caused by the influence of Maria's L1, which is Spanish:

*Joe:* Maria, why did you write "I received a pair of *shoes news* for my birthday"?

*Maria:* Look (*pointing to her shoes*), they are *news*.

*Joe:* Oh, you mean they are your *new shoes*.

*Maria:* Why can't I say *shoes news*? In Spanish, we say, "zapatos nuevos" (shoes news).

*Joe:*  In English, we put the description (the adjective) before the thing (the noun) we describe. So, *new* goes before *shoes*. And, we don't make the adjective plural even though the noun might be plural.

The error in this example is known as a *transfer error* because Maria followed two Spanish grammar rules that do not transfer to writing in English: (1) Nouns go before adjectives in word order, and (2) adjectives must match nouns in singularity/plurality. Tutors could help Maria by pointing out the error to her. At this point, you may wonder why it is necessary to point out the error instead of letting her discover it herself. Errors caused by the interference from the learner's first language are difficult, and sometimes impossible, for her to figure out without help. In the example, Maria felt that she was correct because she followed Spanish grammar rules. Without explicit correction, Maria's meaning gets distorted because *news* is not the plural form of *new*, as Maria had imagined. When tutors notice that the errors that are caused by the L2 learner's mother tongue remain unchanged after the learner's self-editing, tutors should not hesitate to point them out because the L2 learner often appreciates tutors who correct transfer errors that she could not detect by herself. However, unless tutors know their student's native language, they will not be able to recognize specific transfer errors. Some knowledge of the student's first language may help.

Like most theories, the CAH does not tell the whole story of L2 learning. For example, it cannot identify all of the errors that students need to correct. It also predicts many errors that do not occur, and it cannot account for learners who avoid using structures with which they are not familiar. In sum, it may be that the CAH gives us a snapshot of part of the theoretical landscape rather than the entire view.

## Innatist—You Are Hardwired to Learn a Language

Another way to account for an L2 learner's language development is related to an idea about L1 learning proposed by the well-known linguist Noam Chomsky: Children come with a blueprint of their native language to the world.[3] Thus, all young children are hardwired to learn a language. Some linguists believe that this innate ability is not available for L2 learners past puberty, but others say that it may still be available because adult L2 learners create many sentences that they have never heard before. Some linguists believe that L2 learners' language learning ability must be different from the L1 learners' because L2 learners have already learned one language.

Chomsky drew an important distinction in his theory of language learning—the distinction between *competence* and *performance*. *Competence* refers to one's intuitive knowledge about the system of his native language, and *performance* refers to the use of that language. A native speaker's competence develops naturally (hence, *innate*), and he can rely on it to judge whether the

performance in speech or writing is grammatical (as a native speaker would say it). A nonnative speaker's competence of the target second language (the language that she is trying to learn), on the other hand, does not develop completely naturally. Many L2 learners do not grow up with or acquire their second language through immersion but take classes to learn it. As a result, the competence of this type of L2 learners often takes the form not of intuition but of knowledge of the grammar rules that they have learned. They rely on these rules to judge whether or not something is grammatical. Here's an example that illustrates how a tutor, Tina, and an advanced L2 learner, Ling, judge grammaticality as Ling was reading her writing aloud:

*Ling:*  (*Reading aloud*) . . . so my teacher gave me an advice.

*Tina:*  An advice? That doesn't sound right.

*Ling:*  Why not? My writing teacher told me that I need to remember using an article before a noun. The word *advice* begins with a vowel, so I used *an* before *advice*.

*Tina:*  But we don't say "an advice."

*Ling:*  What about "some advices"? Can I use the plural form?

*Tina:*  Hmm, we don't say "some advices" either. We say, "some advice."

*Ling:*  Why? Why can't we use the plural form?

The article system (*a/an/the*) in English often presents problems for learners whose L1, such as Chinese or Japanese, does not have articles. The usage of articles may often depend on the native English speaker's intuition to decide when to use one and which one to use.[4] This intuition for the English article system is what Ling, a Chinese speaker, does not have. Because her teacher had reminded her to use articles in writing, Ling carefully added *an* before *advice* but was told that it did not sound right. Then her attempt to change *an advice* to *some advices* still resulted in an error. In fact, Ling's problem is yet another example that shows Ling's lack of native English speakers' intuition that helps them distinguish between count and noncount nouns in English. To Ling, *advice* is countable, yet in English grammar, *advice* is considered to be a noncount noun. Tina, the native English-speaking tutor, could tell by intuition that it was not grammatical because it did not sound right. In addition, the example also shows that Ling depended heavily on her knowledge of grammar rules to reason through the usage. The point here is that grammar rules cannot possibly tell the learner everything that she needs to know in order to produce error-free sentences because there are some aspects of language production that depend upon L1 intuition.

In fact, there are many instances that cannot be explained by learning the rules in grammar books. For example, we say that people eat *rice* (always in singular form) versus *beans* (always in plural form); people are *in* the car but

*on* the bus, and people *watch* TV but *see* a movie. When a tutor is asked why the choice is this but not that, he will usually reply, "It just is" (see Chapter 17). For idiomatic expressions and usages that cannot be explained by grammar rules but only by the native English-speaking (NES) tutor's intuition, the best way to help the learner is simply to tell her, "This is what a native speaker would use intuitively."

Applying Chomsky's distinction between *competence* and *performance*, Stephen Pit Corder relates *error* to failure in *competence* (wrong knowledge or lack of knowledge) and *mistakes* to failure in *performance* (e.g., typos or slips of the tongue).[5] A tutor cannot always tell whether the deviant sentences she sees are errors or mistakes; nonetheless, if she notices that the same problem appears repeatedly even after the L2 learner has proofread her writing, then there is a good chance that the learner's knowledge of the usage is incorrect. In other words, it may be an error or competence problem. In addition to L1 transfer errors (involving, e.g., prepositions, article usages, and word order), caused by L2 learners' insufficient or incorrect knowledge are also the ones that learners cannot detect by themselves. This is true no matter how many times they read their writing aloud. If the learners are motivated to learn, tutors should not hesitate to point out those errors explicitly.

The innatist view on language acquisition provided a springboard for Stephen Krashen, one of the most influential applied linguists, to develop his *monitor model*. Because young children's acquisition of their first language is a feat that adult L2 learners cannot help but admire, Krashen proposed to re-create the naturalist language acquisition experience of young children for L2 learners.[6] For tutors interested in how people learn a second language, the monitor model is a useful guide.

Krashen's monitor model of SLA consists of five key ideas:

1. acquisition/learning hypothesis
2. monitor hypothesis
3. natural order hypothesis
4. comprehensible input hypothesis
5. affective filter hypothesis

What follows is an explanation of each of the above key ideas.

### The Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis

According to Krashen, *acquiring* a language is different from *learning* one. *Acquisition* refers to the process of picking up a language the way young children do—subconsciously. The best way for the L2 learner to become competent in another language is by acquisition, or exposure to the L2 input (such as reading a book in the second language) at a level that the learner understands, while the learner's attention is on meaning but not on grammar. *Learning*, on the other hand, is consciously studying the language (the grammar rules). In Krashen's view, learned competence does not become acquired competence, so he denies a role for conscious learning in language acquisition.[7] Also, Krashen indicates that acquisition, but not learning, is responsible for fluency. This is so because formal learning makes the learners conscious of grammar rules. Consequently, the learners tend to inspect or monitor their grammar, and hence reduce the fluency, in their speech or writing.

Krashen's *learning/acquisition hypothesis* can explain the differences in writing difficulties between immigrant and international ESL students. For example, an immigrant student of mine wrote *firstable* instead of *first of all* to state his first point. He understood the meaning and he knew how to use the expression, yet the form was incorrect. Apparently, this student had acquired or picked up the use of the expression, but he had not acquired the form. Joy Reid points out that immigrant students often acquire with their ears many English expressions from the environment without formally learning about them.[8] Immigrant students may be relatively fluent in speaking, but they may have limited understanding of the structures of the English language. Similar to L1 students' errors, many immigrant ESL students' errors are caused by the differences between speaking and writing. For this reason, oral fluency does not always go hand-in-hand with grammatical accuracy, and oral proficiency is not necessarily related to writing proficiency. Though immigrant students may have more intuitive sense than international students of what sounds right, they may need to explicitly learn some grammar rules when their acquisition-by-ear has misled them. (See Chapters 4 and 18.)

Many international students, by contrast, have learned English by studying vocabulary and grammar rules. They often understand and can explain grammar, yet they lack the experience of hearing and using English in daily life. Their word choice and sentence structures are often unconventional. "I don't know how to express my meaning in English" is often their complaint. The point is that international students lack native English speakers' intuitions about what sounds right. They need corrections that are pointed out explicitly for the problems that they cannot fall back on their own intuitions to fix. As Ben Rafoth (Chapter 17) points out, this is a good reason for tutors to study the structure of English grammar.

It is worth noting that Krashen does not deny the value of grammar teaching for high school and college students, but he does not assume that the rules students *learned* will become *acquired*.[9] As an L2 learner, I have studied grammar in a non-English-speaking environment, and I have lived in an English-speaking environment for quite a few years. Consequently, my competence probably comes from both explicit learning and implicit acquisition. Although Krashen believes learning does not turn into acquisition, I believe the explicit grammar knowledge that I gained earlier has facilitated my aquisition of English later. I don't always have to rely on others' paraphrasing to make input comprehensible. Sometimes I am able to understand the input by analyzing its structure. For instance, once when I heard a phrase,

"to zero in on," my first reaction was that I had hardly ever used two prepositions (*in* and *on*) together. Next, I figured that "to zero in on" must be an idiomatic expression and that the *on* indicates the direction. After I analyzed the structure and figured out the meaning from the context, the use of two prepositions started making sense to me, and I was able to pick up the use of this idiomatic expression without much trouble. Pienemann indicates that the learning of linguistic structures before the learner is ready to pick up the structures can still be beneficial because the learner might be able to store these structures in her mind and recall them for active use when she has arrived at a stage where they can be processed.[10] In my case, learning, although not the same as acquisition, at least *facilitates* acquisition.

### The Monitor Hypothesis: The Spotlight

Monitoring is like examining each word or structure in the grammar spotlight. Krashen argues that an L2 learner's monitor operates when time allows, when correctness matters, and when the learner knows the rules. It is easier to employ your monitor in writing than in spontaneous conversation because writing allows more time to focus on form. Therefore, when L2 writers focus on meaning, it is likely that their monitors are not fully operating; consequently, they often forget about inflections (e.g., -s or -ed endings) when they talk or write in a hurry or even when they are too relaxed, not paying enough attention to the inflections. In other words—and this is an important point for tutors to remember—it appears to be difficult to have fluency and accuracy at the same time. Because monitoring is like editing, an appropriate amount of monitoring is necessary to achieve accuracy. However, overmonitoring may cause writer's block, which is something many ESL students have experienced in the process of writing when they worry too much about grammatical accuracy.

### The Natural Order Hypothesis: Similar Order in L1 and L2 Acquisition

Krashen's *natural order hypothesis* states that both L1 and L2 learners follow a similar order in acquiring certain morphemes (grammatical structures such as -*ing*, -*s*, or articles) and make similar mistakes in the developmental processes. For example, at a stage of their language development, some young children and adult L2 learners may overgeneralize (overuse) the past tense -*ed* and use *goed* for the past tense of *go*. Tutors need to be patient with morpheme errors such as missing the third personal singular (-*s*) and plural noun (-*s*) because they often add no meaning to communication and hence are very difficult for L2 writers to acquire.

### The Comprehensible Input Hypothesis: Understanding Leads to Acquisition

The *comprehensible input hypothesis* predicts that for L2 learners to move from one stage to the next, they need to be exposed to L2 input (the new language) that is a little bit beyond their current level but easy enough to understand. The context sometimes helps the learner understand the new language.

For example, an L2 learner may understand the word *chilly* when someone is shivering and saying, "It's chilly today." Input can also become comprehensible to the learner when native speakers use so-called *foreigner talk*, which is characterized by a slower rate of speech, repetition, or paraphrasing. When tutoring, tutors may want to paraphrase certain difficult words or make use of gestures or contextual clues to increase comprehensibility.

### The Affective Filter Hypothesis: Low Anxiety Is Conducive to Acquisition

The *affective filter* refers to the emotional state of the learner. To put it simply, when the L2 learner's anxiety, or filter level, is high, then it is difficult for her to acquire the new language. On the other hand, when the learner is motivated and confident—the filter level is low—she acquires the new language more easily. An encouraging and relaxing atmosphere may lower the learner's affective filter, creating conditions conducive to language learning. Thus, recognizing the L2 writer's strengths and complimenting her on them is one way a tutor can make the student feel confident in her writing ability.

So far, we have examined two views of how people learn a second language—behaviorist and innatist. We will now turn to another view: the cognitivist view.

## Cognitivist—Noticing Is Important

SLA scholars have also been influenced by cognitive psychology in explaining how people learn a second language. From this perspective, language learning is similar to learning other skills, and it involves these steps:

$$\text{noticing} \rightarrow \text{practicing} \rightarrow \text{making the skill automatic}$$

Noticing is an indispensable first step.[11] Learning an odd spelling of a word usually begins with noticing it when it appears in print, for example. To help the learner notice a word or phrase, a tutor may highlight it by pointing to it, saying it with a rising intonation or underlining it. The learner may attempt to correct his own error when he notices the tutor's highlighting. If not, the tutor may give more help, such as grammatical commentary, to enhance noticing.

When learning a second language, learners move from *controlled processing* (paying attention) to *repeated activation* (practicing) to *automatization* (being available whenever called on). To attain fluency, the learner needs to make sure that many component, or supporting, skills are automatized.[12] Like a driver who does not need to consciously recall all the component skills, such as when to turn the wheel or use the accelerator, a language learner can be fluent only when she does not need to think about component skills such as subject–verb agreement and word order before she speaks.

During the learning process, the learner's new language system may be restructured due to the increased knowledge. When this occurs, the learner may make impressive progress at some times and backslide at other times. For

example, a student who has used the word *came* correctly for several months may backslide to write *comed* after learning how to use the past tense *-ed* form before finally returning to the correct use of *came* with a new understanding. When this happens, backsliding is actually a sign of the learner's language development. It may be the reason why a student begins making mistakes that he does not usually make.

When a controlled sequence becomes automatized, it is difficult to modify. This helps explain the concept of *fossilization*, a condition when learners stop making any visible progress or when their L2 errors persist, no matter how many classes they attend.[13] Based on McLaughlin's model, fossilization occurs when the learner's language becomes automatized before it is nativelike.[14] To prevent fossilization, some researchers say that error correction and grammar instruction are necessary,[15] but other researchers question the value of error correction because findings on its effectiveness have been inconsistent.[16]

Tutors may wonder if error correction really works because L2 writers often seem to repeat the same errors even after correction. As an L2 learner, I feel it is important to remember that the process of moving from noticing to repeated activation to automatization takes time. The cognitive process is often hidden, and the effect is not immediate. For instance, I used to write "to emphasize on . . . ," without any awareness of the wrong usage until a professor crossed out the *on* in my writing. This explicit error correction enhanced my *noticing* of the correct usage. A few days later as I was editing a paper, I noticed that I had written "to emphasize on . . . ." Later, as I was writing an email, I noticed that I was typing "emphasize on" once more, and I deleted the *on* immediately. Though I had been corrected once, I repeated the same error twice. However, I was aware of the error after I made it the second time. My self-correction happened sooner after I made the same mistake each time. Based on the recent cognitive-psychological views of language learning, I would say that I started restructuring my interlanguage (developing language), but my production of the correct form had not yet become automatized. Through repeated activation—that is, repeatedly using the word and self-correcting the error—the correct form gradually became stabilized. Now, every time I use the word *emphasize*, I feel as if there were a spotlight shining on it, and I always use it correctly.

Looking back, I am sure I had seen or heard the word *emphasize* used correctly countless times in context, but I did not pick up the correct form. Why? The answer may be that *focus*, one of its synonyms, is followed by *on*. It was not until my professor corrected the error did I realize that there was a gap between my usage and the target form. It took me quite a while to produce the correct form automatically. If you have ever watched a duck swimming, you will notice that the duck does not move fast. Sometimes it even looks as though it were not moving at all. What you cannot see, however, are the

duck's webbed feet paddling under the surface of the water. Likewise, what is happening in the L2 learner's mind is like the duck's webbed feet paddling in the water. It is not noticeable, but with time and practice the learner does make progress, and errors are less likely to become fossilized.

As you have probably observed already, one theory can never sufficiently explain the complexity involved in learning a second language. Each of the behaviorist, innatist, and cognitivist theories adds something that the others do not to our understanding of L2 learning. Yet there is one more important theory that forms a piece of the puzzle of L2 learning—the interactionist theory, to which we now turn.

### Interactionist—It Helps to Talk with an Expert

Interactionist theorists state that acquiring a second language takes place mainly through interaction.[17] Although using easier vocabulary and grammatical forms in place of more sophisticated ones can improve comprehensibility, learners may miss out on opportunities to learn more advanced forms. But with interactional or conversational modification between learners and more proficient speakers—like tutors—the more advanced forms become easier to understand, and the learners' attention is drawn to them.[18]

Interestingly, when the L2 learner notices that the new language does not make sense to her or when her writing confuses a tutor, she might come to the realization that she needs to make some changes in the way she understands or uses the new language.[19] Tutors can facilitate this by using interactional tactics such as checking comprehension, requesting clarification, confirming meaning, self-repeating, and paraphrasing.[20] Here is an example of interactional modification between Hui, an ESL writer, and Dan, a tutor, as Hui is reading her draft:

*Hui:* (*Reading aloud*) To pass the college entrance exam, I had to study hardly.

*Dan:* You mean the college entrance exam was very easy? [clarification]

*Hui:* No, no. I read my book *hardly*. I studied ten hours every day. [clarification]

*Dan:* Are you saying you *studied a lot* in order to pass the college entrance exam? [elaboration, clarification/confirmation]

*Hui:* Yes, I studied very much. [modification]

*Dan:* Oh, OK, I see what you mean. [confirmation]
You had to *study hard* in order to pass the college entrance exam. You see, *hardly* means "almost never." [clarification]

*Hui:* Then, I studied *hard* to pass the exam. [modification]

Essentially, interactional modifications give learners opportunities to pay attention to potentially troublesome parts of their L2 production. Through clarification and modification of the message, L2 learners have a chance to not only hear the words or grammatical structures that they wish to know but also notice the features in their new language that need to be corrected or modified.

Another perspective on the role of interaction in SLA is Lev Vygotsky's social cultural theory of cognitive development.[21] Vygotsky's work may be familiar to tutors who are education majors. Vygotsky's theory usually refers to the ways children learn, but it has been applied to adults' second language acquisition.[22] In this view, L2 learning takes place while the learner interacts with an expert (a tutor or teacher). Such interaction is helpful when it is appropriate to the learner's current and potential level of development, or what Vygotsky called the learner's *zone of proximal development* (ZPD).[23] To determine a student's ZPD, the tutor can talk with the student and find out precisely what he is able to do without help and what he can accomplish with assistance. The example below shows how a tutor, Michelle, applies the concept of ZPD in assisting an ESL student, Reiko, who brought a draft of her research paper to the writing center:

*Michelle:* Tell me what you found out in your research. [detecting what the learner can say without help]

*Reiko:* I found out that the earth is getting hot every year.

*Michelle:* The earth is getting . . . ? [detecting if the learner can do self-correction]

*Reiko:* The earth is getting warmer every year. [successful self-correction]

*Michelle:* And scientists call that . . . ? [detecting what the learner can say without help]

*Reiko:* Greenroom effect.

*Michelle:* Green*room* effect? [detecting if the learner can do self-correction]

*Reiko:* Yes. [confirmation]

*Michelle:* You mean the green*house* effect. [providing help when the learner was not able to do self-correction]

*Reiko:* Yes, yes, the green*house* effect. [reformulation]

In the example, Michelle figured out what Reiko was able to do with and without assistance. Michelle provided help, a word choice correction, for Reiko because word choice problems are often difficult for L2 writers to self-correct. As a result, Reiko improved her English when she talked with Michelle. This is also a good example of how the talk that occurs in tutoring sessions can be just as important as the writing.

## Conclusion

This chapter has summarized four of the major theories on how L2 learners process second languages in their minds as they learn. It is clear that understanding how ESL learners learn English is not a simple matter. The four major theories may help answer some puzzling questions as raised in the beginning of this chapter.

The behaviorist view of L2 learning explains that L2 learners' unconventional word order and word choice may be attributed to their L1 influence or lack of experience in hearing and using English in their daily lives. Different languages imply different habits. Therefore, prepositions, articles, and idiomatic expressions are particularly difficult areas for learners whose L1 is very different from English.

Based on the theories proposed by innatists, we learn that L2 learners, especially international students, do not have the native English speaker's intuition for what sounds right or wrong in English. Therefore, when L2 learners do not know the grammar rules or their hypotheses of how English works are false, they will not be able to detect their errors no matter how many times they read their writing aloud, which is also a reason why their errors persist.

Some L2 learners' errors seem resistant to correction. From the perspective of cognitivists, it is possible that (1) the wrong usages have become fossilized or (2) if not, the cognitive change (in restructuring the interlanguage) is taking place but is unobservable, or the effect has not yet appeared. Furthermore, backsliding, insufficient monitoring, and stress also bear on the persistence of errors. Tutors should remember that L2 learning never proceeds in a linear, smooth manner. Learners may backslide and use a wrong form due to their overuse of a new grammar rule. According to the monitor model, L2 learners may also forget to follow certain grammar rules when they are not fully monitoring or when they are under stress.

To make English learning easier for L2 writers, tutors might aim for the following in their interaction with the L2 writers:

- Recognize learners' strengths.
- Provide a friendly and encouraging ambiance in the writing center.
- Draw learners' attention to the target structure they need to learn.
- Have conversations with learners to figure out what they can do with or without assistance.
- Provide appropriate help at the right time.

In this chapter, I have shared with you some major theories of SLA and illustrated them with some of my personal experiences and those of other L2 learners. After all, you have probably learned an important lesson: Learning a second language is hard work, and it takes a long time.

With an understanding of the theories and challenges that L2 learners face, you may become more empathetic and better prepared to tutor L2 writers.

Recommendation: The discipline of SLA is fast growing and fascinating. Interested readers may find more information about SLA in publications by, for example, Rod Ellis, Rosamond Mitchell and Florence Myles, and Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada.

## Notes

1. Rod Ellis (1994) indicates that a thorough approach to second language acquisition (SLA) covers (1) the black box (learner language processing mechanisms in the mind), (2) individual learner factors (e.g., age, sex, motivation), and (3) environmental factors (e.g., social settings). All three aspects interact. Some aspects are more controversial than others. For example, not all researchers agree that individual learner factors have a direct impact on language processing. Due to space limits, this chapter discusses only some major theories of the first of these approaches, the black box. To explain learner language processing mechanisms, I follow Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada's categorization of theoretical approaches to explaining second language learning. See Lightbown and Spada (1999, 35–45).

2. The CAH is usually attributed to Robert Lado's work in 1957. See Lado, 2.

3. Chomsky, 32.

4. Buell.

5. Corder, 167.

6. Krashen, 26–27.

7. Krashen, personal communication, March 17, 2002.

8. Reid, 3–17.

9. Krashen, personal communication, March 17, 2002.

10. Pienemann, 72.

11. Schmidt, 129–158.

12. McLaughlin, 133–34.

13. Michael Long (2003) believes that *stabilization* is a more appropriate term for what has commonly been called as *fossilization* in interlanguage development.

14. Mitchell and Myles, 86.

15. Higgs and Clifford, 57–80.

16. Truscott (1996).

17. Long and Robinson (1998).

18. Long and Robinson, 22.

19. Gass, Mackey, and Pica, 301.

20. Michael Long indicates that native speakers constantly modify their language when they talk with nonnative speakers. See Long (1983).

21. Vygotsky (1987), 21.

22. See, for example, Ohta, 54.

23. Vygotsky (1978), 84–91.

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# 3

# Breaking Ice and Setting Goals

## Tips for Getting Started

### Shanti Bruce

When most students enter one-to-one tutoring situations for the first time, they expect tutors to manage introductions and dictate the way their sessions will go. While tutees often behave like guests and need to be introduced to the writing center and the conferencing process on their first visit, on subsequent visits they may continue to take their cues from tutors. Even when students become familiar with the conferencing process, they may be shy about starting or wait for the tutor to begin out of respect. For all of these reasons, tutors who know how to take the first step, to bring the writer into the conference by offering a friendly greeting and finding a comfortable place to meet, will put students at ease by showing them that they are a welcome part of this peer tutoring duo. This is true for U.S. students and even more so for international ones.

Getting started is often the hardest part of any task or assignment, and it is especially so for English as a second language (ESL) students. The reasons for this are varied, but for many students they include feeling intimidated, fearing being judged, worrying about taking risks, or being unfamiliar with the assignment. These reasons account for many of the students who put off going to the writing center. Aside from procrastination, some students are just not convinced that a visit to the writing center will be worthwhile. Some may also feel that a tutoring conference will be uncomfortable and even scary. They may be afraid to take that first step of walking into the writing center—an unfamiliar place where it is hard to blend into the background and remain anonymous. Just by walking in the door, students are admitting to themselves and everyone there that they need help.

Sami, an ESL student from Saudi Arabia, is a prime example of this conundrum: He needs the help the writing center offers, but he is uncomfortable admitting it. (I discuss my meeting with Sami in Chapter 18.) He revealed that asking for help is actually a cultural taboo for many Arab male students. He