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Second Language Acquisition Digital Teaching  
Materials: Unit 9 Research on language learning:  
How to read a research article?

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# SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

## UNIT #9: BALANCING FORM AND MEANING IN INSTRUCTION 1

### 9.1 WHAT WE'LL COVER IN THIS UNIT

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In this unit we will focus on the first three “proposals for teaching” that are presented in our coursebook *How Languages are Learned*. These three proposals and the three we’ll be looking at in the next unit present a wide range of possible approaches which are then evaluated and critiqued based on the literature. We’ll be looking at their evidence as well as reading some research more in depth. These online materials will supplement our coursebook, and it’s essential to turn there for the most detailed background information. This present unit will begin with a review of this history of research on language teaching methodology in order to provide context for these ideas.

- Research into “the best method”
- “Get it right from the beginning” – following the traditional approach
- “Just listen and read” — seeing the effect of comprehensible input
- “Let’s talk” — the power of conversational interaction

### 9.2 THE “BEST METHOD” IN CONTEXT

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Language teaching is a one of the fields of education where great promise has been seen in finding the “best method” for teaching a second or foreign language, and this history of formal language teaching shows wave after wave of methods which promised to make language learning successful and efficient. Similar concern with method might be found in mathematics and music education as well, but there is a particular focus on in language teaching and learning.

What has been this history of this kind of research, and why has it failed? We can speak of three stages of “methods research” in language learning. The first stage was from the 1940s to the 1970s and this is the global methods comparison stage. It was thought that if a large and well organized scientific study could

be carried out, then the question of the best method would be solved. This was what was done in the early 1960 with the so-called “Pennsylvania Project”.

Recall that in the early 1960s the standard behaviorist view of learning was being challenged by up- and- coming cognitive models, and so a comparison was done between the audiolingual method, based on imitation and habit formation, and the cognitive code method which was based on the assumption that learners were forming mental rules for the language and were not simply forming habits. The two methods were quite distinct in both their theoretical basis and their in-class practice.

The research design was rigorous and included a wide variety of variables. Students who were studying Spanish at the university were the participant, and the study lasted for two years. Half of the students were taught using the audiolingual method, and half were taught using the cognitive code method. Outcome variables included reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, and individual differences were also studied including aptitude, motivation, gender, previous learning experience, etc., since it might be the case that particular types of individuals perform better in one of the other method.

The results of this quite important study were a disappointment: no main effects were found between methods, although some minor and complex interactions were found between individual variables, language skills, and method. That is, this study was unable to show that these two radically different methods produced any different results.

Why was this the case? It was possible that in this large of a study teachers were not following the separate methods as efficiently as they should have, and in fact the details of the methods themselves may not have been completely clear. But, the most important and overarching reason is that there were just too many competing independent variables at work which may have influenced the outcomes. There were just too many variables involved with a large group of students and teachers over the course of the study. In the end, some people felt that they simply didn’t know what was going on these classrooms to influence language learning. And, it was unlikely that even if clear results were found, it would be possible to generalize these results to different learners with different goals in different educational institutions and studying different languages. Global methods research was effectively ended.

Although the idea of “best method” was abandoned, research into how languages are learned in classrooms was just beginning. The second stage of methods research, in the 1970s and 80s involved descriptive studies which tried to fill the gap of providing information about what was actually happening in language classrooms. These studies were rarely evaluative or theoretically motivated, but began a tradition of ethnographic classroom research that continues until today. The third stage, which began in the 1990 and is lasting until today involves more focused research looking at variables in the classroom, such as practice, or looking at classroom processes and how they lead to “products”, or learning. These studies are often theoretically motivated and involve working closely with teachers in context.

The result of this research is not at all likely to be a “best method” but is almost always a proposal for teachers to consider variables in their classroom and to understand how learn happens in different contexts. This is exactly what our coursebook is doing with the six proposals for teaching

To get an idea of just how far we’ve come from the global methods approach, watch the following video by Diane Larsen-Freeman where she explains her suggestions of an approach to teaching. This is a continuation of her video that we saw in the previous unit.

## VIDEO TASK: STARTING AT THE END – MODERN APPROACHES TO CLASSROOM TEACHING

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Watch the following brief video and see how it is different from the “best method” stage.

Diane Larsen-Freeman on modern approaches to classroom teaching

Part 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhigaLxsYtU>

You’ve certainly noticed that she identifies the overarching theory that she’s working from right away. This theory gives her perspective to help understand what is going on in the classroom. You can see her approach to language and to learning, and she gives examples to back this up. This is indeed an approach to teaching that she offers, not a prescription for the best method.

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We’ll move on to have a look at the six proposals, which as we now know, are not suggestions for the best method, but key ideas. Keep in mind that the authors of these proposals are as we’ve seen through the entire book concerned with the issues of how best to balance form and meaning in the classroom in order to help students to become effective users of the language. We’ll see that some of their proposals are unworkable, and others offer ideas which can be worked into effective teaching. None of them form a comprehensive plan for language teaching but most contain key and valuable ideas. The final approach, of course, will contain all of these ideas.

### 9.3 "GET IT RIGHT FROM THE BEGINNING" – FOLLOWING THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH?

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The “get it right from the beginning” approach is a structure-based approach which focuses on the learning or forms. In this approach, grammar would be overtly taught from the beginning. The focus is on accuracy, and being accurate from the beginning. Two “name brand” methods use this same approach, the audiolingual method and the grammar translation method. This approach might be the most popular approach used around the world, and in many cases it might be the most obvious point of departure for teaching and learning: if accuracy is the goal in the end, the demand accuracy.

To get an idea of what this is like in practice, look at the following video which demonstrates the audiolingual method.

## VIDEO TASK: STARTING AT THE END – MODERN APPROACHES TO CLASSROOM TEACHING

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The video should start at the 6:00 mark after the teacher has set up the activity. In this class the teacher has introduced a dialogue, which is the sales pitch of a door to door vacuum cleaner salesman. Once the teacher has presented the dialogue, the students are then asked to repeat. How close is this experience to what you have seen in your own classes?

An example of an audiolingual class. Begin at 6:00. You'll probably want to watch it for a few minutes to get an idea of what's happening.

<https://youtu.be/ExoJq8G75mM?t=360>

It's doubtful that you have ever experienced an audiolingual class, but the restricted communication done in service of allowing for complete accuracy might be familiar to you. Imagine how different it might be if students were actually learning to communicate. As we'll find out later, activities such as the one depicted here are not practicing language, but are practicing form alone. In a sense, it is only practicing language-like behavior.

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There are several problems with insisting on accuracy from the very beginning. First, research has shown that this approach simply doesn't work. In one study outlined in our text looking at the audiolingual method, it was possible to achieve accuracy inside the classroom, but this didn't transfer to accuracy in real world communication. In a second study, adding communication practice to audiolingual practice was shown not to lead to inaccuracy. Another problem with this approach is that it contradicts what we know about language acquisition. Taking question formation as an example, we know that students will be inaccurate as they move through the stages of learning questions, with accuracy becoming more and more frequent as learning progresses. In this case it is nearly impossible to be accurate from the beginning, and a focus on accuracy like this might inhibit development. However, if learners are higher aptitude students or highly motivated students this approach may work better.

The overall problem with this approach is not that it involves grammar teaching. In fact not only is it a goal of this course to explore how best to teach grammar, it also supports the assumption that explicit teaching of form is necessary. What is problematic here is the insistence on accuracy from the beginning.

### 9.3 —“JUST LISTEN AND READ” — SEEING THE EFFECT OF COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT

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The second approach is based on Krashen's Monitor Model and the idea that second and foreign languages can be learned from comprehensible input alone. As we saw in a previous unit, this view also leads to the conclusion that grammar teaching does not have an effect on the developing linguistic

system. In a sense then, this is the opposite of the structure-based, “get it right in the beginning” approach. In the following video Krashen explains his theory and gives a useful demonstration.

Presentation by Stephen Krashen. Watch the first five minutes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiTsdureug>

Krashen clearly states his point of view at the end of his demonstration: “We learn language in one way and one way only, when we understand messages.” His demonstration of a German lesson which is impossible to understand and one which is plainly comprehensible nicely illustrates his point. We indeed can understand what he is communicating to us. We are not passive, but actively understanding the message. At the level of a classroom activity, he is giving an excellent demonstration of one of the skills that all language teachers should have. But, is it possible to learn language this way?

Probably the most straightforward way to see this mechanism at work would be in learning vocabulary through reading. How likely is it that vocabulary can be learned effectively through only understanding the messages of what we are reading?

#### READING TASK: READING AND VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

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Before you read the following passage, think about whether you believe that Krashen’s theory is actually supported by your own experience: do you really learn words best by only comprehending texts? Does it help to engage in explicit activities, too?

Is reading the best way to learn vocabulary?

This statement is true but it does not tell the whole story. Children expand their vocabulary dramatically during their school years, and reading is the major source of this growth. Second language learners can also increase their vocabulary knowledge through reading, but few second language learners will read the amount of target language text that a child reads in the course of more than a decade of schooling.

Research evidence suggests that second language learners benefit from opportunities to read material that is interesting and important to them. However, those who also receive guidance from instruction and develop good strategies for learning and remembering words will benefit more than those who simply focus on getting the main ideas from a text. What is perhaps most striking in the research is the evidence that in order to successfully guess the meanings of new words in a text, a reader usually needs to know more than 90 per cent of the words in that text.

—Lightbown and Spada 2013:171

As they note, for first language learning, vocabulary is undoubtable learned through reading, and academic vocabulary and rare words may only be experienced and learned there. But, they point of that while this is indeed true for second language learner as well, they also will benefit from explicit vocabulary learning activities. Furthermore, being able to guess the meaning of a word depends on knowing the other words in the text – and then only a guess can be made. Indeed, even in vocabulary learning through reading, while the comprehensible input being received from the text is of utmost value, explicit vocabulary learning also plays a role.

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But what about the research on learning through input only, what does it say? One of the most interesting studies was a longitudinal study done in Canada where a group of children who were participating in a comprehension-based English learning program throughout primary school. These children listened to and read in English for 30 minutes a day and had no interaction with their teachers in English. After two years the students were compared against a similar group of students who were instructed using traditional methods. The results are startling – the comprehension-based children scored just as well as the children who had participated in the traditional program, and even scored comparably on speaking, but they had never practiced speaking in class. Some of these students were followed through grade 8 and were evaluated again. The authors of the paper conclude that a comprehension- based program may not produce results after eight years which are as good as a well-run language learning program, but the results are as good as would be expected in less effective program (Lightbown et al. 2002). That is learning from input can be surprising effective, but perhaps is not the optimal program

Following up the research: To read Lightbown et al’s fascinating study of learning through comprehension, click on the following link:

[Lightbown, P. M., R. Halter, J. L. White, and M. Horst. 2002. ‘Comprehension-based learning: The limits of “do it yourself”.’ \*Canadian Modern Language Review\* 58/3: 427–64.](#)

Overall, then it looks like comprehension-based instruction might be appropriate for beginners where great progress apparently can be made. And in any case, it could supplement learning at all levels. It is just simply not possible to ignore the powerful effects of comprehensible input, and these days when English reading, music, videos, and podcasts are so accessible, we have the resources to put such a program into practice wherever we are.

We’ve also seen, though, that comprehensible input might not be enough, and that explicit instruction is needed. Further, as we’ll see later, there is a vital role for output in language learning, and not just to practice what has been learned, but to actively learn and develop the linguistic system. We’ve also seen this before, in unit 8 where we looked at the jigsaw task. There, it was output which was driving learning.

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## 9.4 — “LET’S TALK” — THE POWER OF CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION

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Progressing on to another approach, we'll have a look at the "let's talk" approach. This approach is based on the idea that using language in conversation with others, carrying out tasks, and engaging in communication does not merely practice what we already know, but brings us into contact with new words, structure and constructions that are then poised to learn.

One of the ways this happens is through the negotiation of meaning, a series of conversational moves which potentially makes language comprehensible and salient to learners. Generally three types of negotiation for meaning are noted:

Negotiation of meaning:

Comprehension checks: "Did you understand what I said?" I was born in Nagasaki. Do you know Nagasaki?

Confirmation check: "Do I understand you correctly..." NNS1: When can you visit me?  
NNS2: Visit?

-Clarification request: "Tell me what this means" NNS1: ...research

NNS2: Research, I don't know the meaning

As can be seen, comprehension checks allow a speaker to make sure that they were understood. A confirmation check is made by the hearer also to make sure that they understood the correct message. And, a clarification request gives the hearer a chance to ask for more information. As can be seen, to the degree that comprehensive input is important, using negotiation of meaning allow input to be made comprehensible. In a sense, these conversational moves do the work that Krashen was doing in the video that we saw earlier in this unit.

But there are two other events that might be going on here in conversation which lead to learning: input is made salient, and output is produced. We'll speak about the value of output when looking at another approach. Here we'll briefly focus on salience. Salience, or making things noticeable or clear, is vital for language learning. We saw earlier in the discussion of the critical period that one of the problems with people learning after the critical period is that some elements of grammar are less salient and are extremely difficult to notice. Conversation can have a positive effect on this and draw attention to important elements of language in working memory. Second, conversation can promote "noticing the gap", that is noticing the gap between our level and someone else's – someone who we see as a model at that point. This type of noticing might lead to modified output and language development.

Since interaction involves learning from others, one worry that teachers and students alike have is whether or not learners will learn each other's errors. What do you think about this?

## READING TASK: COPYING THE ERRORS OF OTHER STUDENTS

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Have you seen examples of students copying each other's errors? Have you seen examples of students learning from each other? Which seem a more important issue to you?

When students are allowed to interact freely, do they copy each other's mistakes?

The language that learners hear and read serves as input to their language development. The cognitive processes that allow them to learn from input are not 'shut down' when they are interacting with other learners. Thus, when learners interact with each other, they may provide some incorrect input. Furthermore, when learners come from the same first language background and are at roughly the same level of proficiency, they are likely to understand each other very well, eliminating the need for negotiation for meaning that might lead them to replace their interlanguage patterns with more target-like ones. Nevertheless, the benefits of pair and group work far outweigh the disadvantages, especially if the tasks are properly designed.

If the activities are well designed and learners are appropriately matched, pair and group work provides far more practice in speaking and participating in conversations than a teacher-centered class ever could. Somewhat surprisingly, research has shown that learners do not produce any more errors in their speech when talking to learners at similar levels of proficiency than they do when speaking to learners at more advanced levels or to native speakers. The research also shows, however, that learners at similar levels cannot ordinarily provide each other with information that would help to correct those errors. Nonetheless, tasks can be devised in such a way that learners working together can discover not only how to express or interpret meaning but also how to discover the correct patterns in the second language. In order for this to happen, the tasks must be carefully planned to give learners access to the new language they need.

Group and pair work is a valuable addition to the variety of activities that encourage and promote second language development. Used in combination with individual work and teacher-centered activities, it plays an essential role in language teaching and learning.

—Lightbown and Spada 2013:174

As you can, there is certainly a chance that students will produce errors when they work together, but the benefits outweigh the risks it seems. As Lourdes Ortega (2006) points out concerning meaningful practice in the foreign language classroom, "In short, a surprising but reasonable thought is that teachers may need to view accuracy as a desirable product of learning rather than a catalyst for learning," (p. 189). And, "The need to probe cognitive and linguistic complexity during L2 practice, even if accuracy seems compromised, cannot be overstated," (p. 190)." In other words, even though inaccuracy may appear in the classroom, there is more to be gained by challenging students in communicating with each other.

Following up the research — to find out more about group dynamics, group work and second language learning, read the following study:

[McDonough, K. 2004. 'Learner–learner interaction during pair and small group activities in a Thai EFL context.' System 32: 207–24.](#)

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Overall, though, what does the research indicate concerning an approach to teaching which would focus entirely on interaction in the classroom? It is clear that properly organized group and pair work can help students learn and that specific elements of language can be learned through task-based learning and teaching. That is, even though learning is possible through interaction alone, having a form-focus is at least in some part essential

## 9.5 SUMMARY OF THIS UNIT

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In this unit we have reviewed three of the six proposals for language teaching that Lightbown and Spada make. We have seen that each one has something positive to offer, but each has drawbacks as well. In each case we are looking for the right balance of form and meaning. Also, before we began this unit, we had a look at this history of language teaching methods research in general and found out that the search for the best method has been abandoned, and now key principles and approaches are being proposed that can help guide teachers.

Click on the following link for a PowerPoint presentation to hear a summary and concluding remarks concerning unit 9.

[Unit 9 summary and conclusions](#)

## 9.6 KEY CONCEPTS DEVELOPED IN THIS UNIT

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Comprehensible input

Salience

Negotiation for meaning

Comprehension check

Confirmation check

Clarification request

## 9.7 REFERENCES MENTIONED IN THIS UNIT.

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Lightbown, Patsy M. and Nina Spada. 2013. *How languages are learned*. (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lightbown, P. M., R. Halter, J. L. White, and M. Horst. 2002. 'Comprehension-based learning: The limits of "do it yourself".' *Canadian Modern Language Review* 58/3: 427–64.

McDonough, K. 2004. 'Learner–learner interaction during pair and small group activities in a Thai EFL context.' *System* 32: 207–24.

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