

Stages in ESL Acquisition: Practical Implications on EL2 Curriculum Planning and Design

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Abstract

This paper is not a report of empirical findings on English (as a second) Language learning. It is rather a descriptive analysis of the stages of language acquisition as they relate to the needs of freshmen learners in this university. Based on knowledge of which structures are commonly controlled at which level of proficiency, the grammatical coverage of the first-year language program can be partially restructured. In addition to exploiting research studies that focus explicitly on developmental sequences, I suggested in the present study that beginning language instruction particularly in the first year in the university might profit considerably from a more intensive listening course for the lower level students side by side with the teaching of speaking. It is hoped that the results of this kind of descriptive research would give materials and language program teachers in the department valuable information for creating new and more effective sequences of methodology, textbooks and the curriculum in general.

A Review of Theoretical Trends

Let me start off by summarizing some of the latest theoretical trends in ESL/EFL instruction. In the teaching of English to university students in Japan, the teaching of speaking is necessarily placed within the broader context of oral communication. But oral communication is a complex and multifaceted language process. In as much as the ability to speak coherently and intelligibly on a focused topic is generally recognized as a necessary goal for ESL students, emphasis is usually placed on speaking activities that provide students opportunities for improving oral fluency through interpersonal communication.

This current trend on oral communication in ESL programs is an offshoot of a paradigm shift witnessed in the 1980's in EFL/ESL instruction. It is a shift of focus from knowledge about

language, to a focus on language use - the ability to use EFL/ESL competency in each of the four skill areas. In the wake of this shift of emphasis from knowledge of language and its rules to language use, many teaching methods and textbooks sought to reconcile traditional grammar syllabus with the newer functional - notional or situation syllabus. In this regard, the structural syllabus was generally retained as an organizational framework. It is not uncommon that today's functionally-oriented textbooks (Chafe, 1987) commonly include authentic and semiauthentic oral and written passages for communicative and semi-communicative activities in all the skill areas.

This wide array of goals is the problem. Although the sequence of grammatical structures has changed somewhat to accommodate the functional perspectives of the 80's and 90's, the scope (amount of material covered) has remained largely to be the same. Today's instructional ESL programs, methodology, and textbooks place on students ever increasing demands for communicative activities, neglecting the basic reality of student readiness when they step into the university.

The Problem

In as much as the focus of this study is on Freshmen University students in this university, two important elements have to be considered in planning an ESL curriculum for first year students (1) ESL students' knowledge of English and (2) the built-in acquisition process. The first involves an awareness on the part of the program developers and planners of what language capacity students bring with them from High School, what they can do and what they can not do in terms of language study. The built-in acquisition process has been discussed in voluminous discussions (Ritchie & Bathia, 1996) and will not be dealt with here.

One basic and vital question to be answered is what is actually involved in learning English in the first year? What are the tasks involved and what do the learners need to accomplish to be able to lean to communicate orally.

I think it is necessary to bring out the notion of communicative competence in relation to the present discussion. Communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1983), the goal of the present English curriculum, minimally involves four areas of knowledge and skills. These include (1) grammatical competence, (2) sociolinguistic competence, (3) discourse competence, and (4) strategic competence. The first of these, grammatical competence, is most related to communicative competence will now be briefly summarized and discussed. Grammatical competence reflects knowledge of the linguistic code itself. It includes knowledge of vocabulary and rules of word formation, pronunciation, spelling and sentence formation, or word order. These are the totally tremendous goals that first year students are expected to achieve.

Although this is a rather oversimplification of the oral communication goals in ESL, it will lead to the next and even vital question of how ready are the students to handle these tasks. In order to situate the incoming students within a realistic framework of language tasks, needs and goals, I have decided to use Murphy's (1996) Framework of the Components of Oral Communication Skills. The items in the quadrant are re-labeled here as classroom tasks and skills, rather than

classroom activities as originally described. The activities, in this paper identified as tasks, within each of the four quadrants are arranged according to proficiency level, from beginning to advanced. The hierarchy, however, is provisional in nature. Production activities are located on the left and attending activities are located on the right.

Sometimes, the various foci represented by each quadrant suggest competing directions. It falls to the ESL curriculum planner what to emphasize for each of the different skill levels, if and when to work on broader skills of integration, when to work on pronunciation, and when to aim for varying degrees of integration in various proficiency levels. Though speaking activities and pronunciation activities are addressed separately here, the intention is not to imply that they are mutually exclusive. Due to the high degree of overlap among the different skill areas, a fundamental premise underlying this article is that attention to speaking, listening and pronunciation must proceed in an integrated fashion, based on a Natural Sequential Theory on Second Language Development.

FIGURE 1
Classroom Tasks for Oral Communication Arranged by Proficiency Level

	Quadrant One: SPEAKING	Quadrant Two: LISTENING
Beginning ↑ F L U E N C Y A C T I V I T I E S ↓ Advanced	*Practicing pattern drills	Demonstrating comprehension through gestures and actions (as in TPR)
	*Rehearsing dialogues	Matching pictures with aural input
	*Completing information-gap activities	Guessing meanings of high frequency words with aid of realia
	Singing in whole class settings	Completing information gaps, Listening jigsaw materials cloze materials
	Playing interactive games(e.g., 20 Questions)	Silently reading along with listening material
	Interviewing classmates	Guessing the meanings of abstract words from context
	Introducing others to the class	Taking dictation
	*Introducing oneself to the class	Scanning recordings of minilectures for main points, key words, topic changes supporting material, conclusions, etc.
	*Discussing content material in small groups	Taking written notes during minilectures
	Discussing topical issues in small groups	Listening in order to answer true/false questions, multiple choice questions, open ended questions, math problems, ethical or moral problems
	Discussing topical issues in small groups	Attending to recordings of phone messages, radio/television broadcasts
	Problem solving in small groups	Inferring situations, purposes, goals settings participants, connections between events, literal & implied meanings, causes & effects
	Role playing	Attending to fast, fluent, conversational speech, simulated academic lectures, recordings of academic lectures
	Telephoning or interviewing non-acquaintances	Analyzing lecture materials (and/or transcripts) for discourse markers, cohesive devices, rhetorical organization
	Speaking to inform	Scanning lecture materials in order to identify overall topic development key words, purpose & scope, main points, supporting material, topic changes, conclusions
	Summarizing topics presented by others	Predicting topic developments
	Practicing the use of CL/CLL oral responses	Identifying the attitude of a lecturer toward a topic
	Leading discussions in small groups	Attending to an authentic academic lecture in order to produce lists of key words, brief written notes, comprehensive written notes
	Debating topical issues in class	Listening in order to synthesize, analyze, and respond creatively to a speaker's topic
	Enacting sociodramas	Listening for pleasure and entertainment
Delivering an oral report to the whole class	Participating fully in mainstream, content-area classrooms	

FIGURE 1 - *Continued*
Classroom Tasks for Oral Communication Arranged by Proficiency Level

	Quadrant Three: ORAL PRODUCTION	Quadrant Four: AURAL DISCRIMINATION
F L U E N C Y A C T I V I T E S ↑ Beginning ↓ Advanced	*Repeating after a speaker isolated words, brief phrases, segmentals, syntactic patterns, formulaic expressions, lines from dialogues	Identifying word boundaries; boundaries between thought groups; changes in pace, volume, & pitch; segmentals in initial, medial, & word final positions; consonant clusters; vocabulary items from a predetermined list; content words within streams of speech; key words; function & content words; word order patterns; features of stress, rhythm, and intonation in : isolated words of one-, two-, and many syllables; short phrase; simple noun phrases; prepositional phrases; adjective+noun phrases; complete sentences; longer stretches of discourse;
	Self-initiating the production of isolated words, brief phrases, formulaic expressions, brief stretches of connected discourse	grammatical suffixes (e.g., plurals, past tense); letters, spellings, abbreviations; sound patterns with aid of orthographic forms; numbers times dates; chronological information; geographic information; weights and measures; contracted forms;
	*Practicing and producing stress patterns at word level, phrase level, sentence level; reduced forms in appropriate locations; intonation contours; (most of the items listed in Quadrant Four)	errors in pronunciation or syntax; special functional uses of intonation; suprasegmental characteristics of slow deliberate speech, fast, fluent, conversational speech, academic speech;
	Practicing voice quality settings	Predicting sound patterns from orthographic forms
	*Vocally reading along with aural input	Recognizing and understanding error corrections
	Practicing "read-and-look-up" activities (Fanselow, 1987, p.308)	Monitoring the pronunciation patterns of others
	*Reading out loud from written text	Monitoring one's own speech patterns via audio recordings, video recordings, live speech
	Understanding and then responding to error corrections	Self-monitoring kinesthetically
	Tracking with recordings of slow, deliberate speech; fast, fluent speech	Covertly rehearsing one's own speech patterns
	Tracking with live material based upon slow, deliberate speech; fast, fluent speech	
	Practicing fast, fluent, conversational speech	
	Practicing kinesthetic techniques (e.g., slow motion speaking, silent tracking)	
	Rehearsing one's speech patterns in front of a mirror	
	Practicing tongue twisters	
	REhearsing dialogue from plays	
Engaging in oral interpretation exercises		
Practicing different dialect patterns (as in acting)		

The items that have been marked represent the tasks which most of the freshmen English learners in the university can actually achieve. This reflects the sad reality of how little they can manipulate English in the beginning of instruction. At its worst, students in the lowest scale know very little and are not familiar with the sounds of English, have very limited vocabulary, and correspondingly can not put these limited storage of words in congruent order to express themselves in complete sentences. Giving them direct oral communication course is meaningless, if not altogether a waste of time and effort.

Assumptions of the study

This study argues that there is a staged development of second language acquisition; and that learners go through different stages of development towards the target language (Klein, 1992). At each stage, some structures build on other structures and can not be acquired before other structures (Pienemann, 1984). If this is so, then it is useful to determine exactly which structures

students are able to control at various stages of their development. Furthermore, one should examine what EFL/ESL learners are able to do at various levels of proficiency to determine developmental sequences in ESL programs.

Research Design and Analysis

Based on the assumptions presented above, a descriptive analysis was conducted on the different oral proficiency levels, developmental levels in word order formation and phonological skills development focusing on the ESL proficiency levels of the first year students in this university.

An Analysis of the Developmental Levels in Oral Communication

There are two major currents that run through any ESL courses in oral communication. The first current focuses upon elements of phonological and grammatical accuracy, while the second focuses upon broader aspects of interpersonal communication (Ikeguchi, 1997). Based upon a needs analysis of such factors as students' educational and social goals, their proficiency levels in oral language, and preferred learning styles, the extent to which the sound system should be introduced, examined and practiced at an early stage. As students develop into higher proficiency level, they need considerable practice with less tightly controlled activities to express themselves fluently and spontaneously via longer stretches of self-generated discourse.

Assuming that similar points may be made about other languages, the following descriptions of the different levels have been made based on SLA data in relation to the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) in German (Tschirner, 1996).

Speakers at the Novice level are held to exhibit only minimal control of even the most frequent constructions. At the intermediate level, students are able to exhibit partial control of only the most frequent constructions, while at the Advanced Level they exhibit good control of frequent simple constructions and some complex constructions. I shall now discuss very briefly each of these stages.

Novice level speakers (Buck et al., 1989) are characterized by communicating only with memorized single words and phrases. It would seem logical that such speakers are operating at a lexical rather than a morphosyntactic level, and thus have essentially no grammar.

Intermediate level speakers whose "utterances tend to be discrete simple sentences (Buck et al., 1989) appear to exhibit an awareness of how a sequence of words makes a sentence. One of the basic elements of a sentence in any language, particularly English, is subject-verb agreement. Intermediate learners are also able to ask questions; and as such may be expected to control S-V agreement, verb-separation and subject-verb inversion in questions.

Advanced learners are able to speak in paragraphs, with a paragraph being defined as a "coherent presentation of a number of utterances tied together by an overall message-intent, such as narration of an event, or description or comparison of a set of circumstances. Textual cohesion, that which distinguishes paragraphs from sentences, is a skill that allows ESL students to refer

forward and backward across sentence boundaries to tie sentences together. Furthermore, advanced learners are also able to narrate and describe in major time/aspect frames, they are expected to control one past tense and one future tense in addition to the present tense.

This description, when related to the quadrant showing the components of Oral Communication presented earlier, will more clearly give a picture of the kind of readiness and “non-readiness” that is characteristic of the lowest freshmen level. In short, our students in the pre-beginning English stage are operating in the word level recognition and can hardly recognize English sounds, much more so control simple structures beyond the word level. My first argument is that it would make sense for a syllabus to be constructed and to present grammar structures according to their natural order of acquisition. To construct formal input in contradiction to natural sequences, may be a waste of time, impede rather than promote language learning.

My second argument is that a distinction has to be made between different types of needs in the beginning, intermediate and advance levels of proficiency in the first year English syllabus, and that each level be given different kinds of attention-the lower ones to be given more listening activities before being given exercises on oral production. Meanwhile the higher levels need be given more productive activities in oral communication. It would make no sense why students who are situated in the lower level of each of these developmental groups should be immersed in conversation classes lasting for 90 minutes that meet twice a week.

An Analysis of the Development Levels in Word Order

There is a causal connection between simplified acquisition and successful acquisition (Chaudron, 1988). Learning word order and word formation in relation to the general structure of English in the different stages of acquisition among second language learners has been the object of numerous studies in the past two decades. Developmental sequences in word order and word formation in SLA have been the focus of investigation in a number of languages. For instance, one of the most researched and consistently validated developmental sequence -in German- is the acquisition of word order, primarily the placement of the finite and nonfinite parts of the verb phrase. The original work yielded a seven-stage implicational scale in which any earlier stage is assumed to be a prerequisite for any later stage (Clahsen, 1984). Latter research has shown that these stages are the same for learners with various native languages (Ellis, 1989). Furthermore, this stage of development shows a similar pattern in naturalistic learning environment as well as in classroom learning environment for both children (Pienemann, 1984) and adults (Ellis, 1989).

TABLE 1

Stage 1: Canonical word order: subject - verb - complement
* <i>Er ist geboren in Rockford.</i> (He was born in Rockford.)
Stage 2: Adverb preposing: adverbial phrase - subject - verb - complement
* <i>In Sommer ich arbeite in *die Restaurant.</i> (In the summer, I work in the restaurant.)
Stage 3: Verb separation: subject - finite verb - complement - non-finite verb
<i>Ich habe meinen Vater *besuchen.</i> (I visited my father.)
Stage 4: Inversion: adverbial phrase - verb - subject - complement
<i>Unter *die Betten haben wir die Schreibtische.</i> (Below the beds, we have desks.)
Stage 5: Verb end in subordinate clauses
<i>Ich mochte studieren, weil ich zwei Prufungen diese Woche habe.</i> (I would like to study because I have two tests this week.)

Until learners have reached Stage 3, they will keep only parts of verb phrases together, as in the example in Stage 1. Until learners have reached Stage 4, they will not be able to apply S-V changes. Stage 3 speakers were expected to be at the Intermediate Level and Stage 4 and Stage 5 speakers were predicted to be at the Advanced Level. Thus, the study shows that learners are able to acquire the grammatical structure of S-V agreement by the Intermediate Level. In another preliminary study with a small number of subjects, this distribution was established (Tshirner, 1996).

Researches have also been conducted on the English learning difficulties of Japanese students across age groups, comparing the structures of the Japanese language and those of English. Studies on specific stages of ESL acquisition among Japanese, however, are very scarce. The findings of Flynn (1966) do indicate some relevant data in relation to this present study.

Results of multifactorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicate no significant differences in results between the two experimental groups. Even more important is that the experimental study points out that learning functional categories (CP) is more difficult than learning simple structures of English, and Japanese children and adults are similarly constrained in their acquisition.

Table 2

Structure	% Correct	
	Child	Adult
Present tense	77%	78%
Past tense	66%	64%
Modal	66%	58%
Progressive	61%	72%
Negation		
Do-support	76%	64%
Progressive	69%	72%
Topicalization		
1 clause, obj gap	53%	69%
2 clause, obj gap	40%	44%
2 clause, subj gap	34%	42%
Reelative clauses	56%	65%
Wh-questions		
Obj gap	58%	42%
Subj gap	48%	50%
Overall	59%	60%

The Problems with early conversation classes

The role of conversation classes in the early stages of ESL study has been the focus of language acquisition studies in the past two decades. In a pioneering work in the issue of L2 acquisition, Hatch (1978) urged that rather than grammatical knowledge developing in order to be put to use in conversations at some latter date “language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on conversations”. Most language teaching syllabi and “methods” assume the reverse. He cautioned however (1983) that some aspects of conversations might actually inhibit learning. For example “Mistakes in the marking of verbs... would not be caught by when questions.

In an explicit discussion of the issue, Sato (1986) proposed that conversation is selectively facilitative of grammatical development, depending on the structures involved. The beneficial effects of conversational scaffolding and situational knowledge on communication makes overt past time marking on verbs expendable in most contexts, which may hinder acquisition by lessening the need to encode the function morphologically in speech. Although most of the few attempts at complex syntactic constructions produced during the children’s first year in English occur in conversational context, there is some limited evidence that conversation nourishes emergent L2 syntax (Sato, 1982).

The claim that conversation facilitates the emergence of at least some types of grammatical devices is essentially one about learner production. So too is the a second claim on the role of

conversation in acquisition. The Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985) suggested that the failure of French immersion students to reach nativelike levels might partly be due to the lack of much genuine opportunity for them to participate in classroom conversation in more than a response mode. Although their receptive skills can reach nativelike standards this way, the ability to decode input using semantic and pragmatic knowledge may inhibit syntacticization (Skehan, 1992). Production on the other hand, can push learners to analyze input grammatically with accuracy also increased by the negative feedback that verbal hypothesis testing elicits. Schachter (1986) suggested that confirmation checks, clarification requests, and other triggers of negotiation work can sensitive learners to a need for greater comprehensibility on their part. These negotiation tasks can aid acquisition by pushing learners to increase control over forms they have already internalized (Nobuyoshi and Elli, 1993).

In a review of classroom studies, Ellis (1992) concluded that there was no clear evidence of a positive effect for “controlled production” practice at least. Ellis noted, however, that such practice might at least raise learners’ consciousness of the target items or of language form in general.

Moving from output and production to input and comprehension, conversation appears to facilitate acquisition in some other ways, with talk that involves participants in negotiation for meaning being especially beneficial. Another contribution is its role in improving comprehension. Because studies (as described in section 3) show that adjustments that occur when meaning is negotiated improve input comprehensibility, and because comprehensible input is necessary, although insufficient, for acquisition, there is clear evidence of an indirect causal relationship between conversation and acquisition.

“Of course, people do acquire, or seem to acquire L2’s.” On the other hand, most people do not do a very good job of it; if absolute across-the-board failure is not the case, neither is the absolute across-the-board success found that characterizes L1 acquisition. In fact it can be argued that truly nativelike competence in an L2 is never attained (Gregg, 1996).

The elements and importance of listening comprehension in the early stage of ESL/EFL study

Comprehension of a spoken message can either be through isolated word recognition within the sound stream, phrase or formula recognition, clause or sentence, and extended speech comprehension (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). The ESL student operates simultaneously in one or two of these areas depending on many factors, one of which is proficiency level. Usually the first year students operate on the first and second levels of comprehension. They catch, if hardly at all, particularly the low beginners, isolated words and can hardly put together the meaning of words put together. On the second level of comprehension, the student can recognize whole phrases and simple routine expressions. They can hardly operate on the third level, understanding clause or sentences, much more so on the fourth, understanding discourse.

Researchers of second language acquisition and many L2 methodologists propose that a specific emphasis on listening instruction, at both beginning and intermediate levels of L2 proficiency, greatly enhances the language learning potentials of ESL students. (Murphy, 1996).

Listening is a significant and essential area of development in the native language and in a second language. “It is the process of receiving, attending to and assigning meaning to aural stimuli” (Wolvin and Coakley, 1985). This definition suggests that listening is a complex, problem-solving skill. The task of listening is more than just perception of sound; although perception is the foundation, it also requires comprehension of meaning. While it is true that listening is integrally connected with other language skills, particularly speaking, focus on this relationship has often led to a failure to teach students how to listen in the first place.

In an earlier discussion, the notion of grammatical competence was mentioned as one of the components of communicative competence. I shall now describe briefly how listening relates to grammatical competence and consequently to communicative competence. It was pointed out earlier that grammatical competence is an umbrella concept that includes increasing expertise in grammar (morphology and syntax), lexicon and vocabulary and its mechanics. Listening is most closely related to mechanics which refers to basic sounds of letters and syllables, pronunciation of words, intonation and stress.

The value of listening activities lies in their capacity to familiarize students with the sound elements of English to be able to understand the meaning of what they hear. If a beginning ESL learner can not understand how words are segmented into various sounds, and how sentences are stressed in particular ways to convey meaning, then he will find it hard to understand the meaning of the message.

Phonological accuracy, which is a result of a guided, systematic and focused instruction on the phonological traits and contrast and speech patterns of English is proven to result in conversational fluency. Because it is a pervasive language experience that operates in contexts ranging from simple conversation to academic debates, the listening process merits careful consideration. It has a primary role in ESL oral communication courses. One of the fundamental sources in differences in language learning aptitude is phonetic coding ability, as described by Carroll (1981) below.

Another basic but vital consideration to make is: when are learners ready to move from a structured and controlled mode to a self-generated spontaneous conversation? From what is

Carroll's Components of Language Learning

1. Phonetic coding ability - the ability to identify distinct sounds, to form associations between those sounds and the symbols represented by them, and to retain these associations.
 2. Grammatical sensitivity - the ability to recognize the grammatical functions of words (or other linguistic entities) in sentence structure.
 3. Rote learning ability for foreign language materials - the ability to learn associations between sounds and meanings rapidly and efficiently, and to retain these associations.
 4. Inductive language learning ability - the ability to infer or induce the rules governing a set of language materials, given samples of language materials that permit such inferences (Carroll, 1967).
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known on the OPI scale interview, (Tschirner, 1996), this jump appears to occur when learners jump from the Intermediate to the Advanced Level. For most university students, this usually happens from the close of the second year moving on to the higher years in college.

The second variable that I wanted to look into was how long does it take learners, on the average, to reach a particular proficiency level? The following levels seem to be fairly established: Intermediate Low after one year of college study, Mid Intermediate after two years, Intermediate High after three years, and Advance after four years.

The European tradition considers the first 250 hours of language instruction as the Beginning level, the next 250 hours are considered the Intermediate level, and the next 250 hours (for a total of 750 hours) the Advance level. It is very enlightening to compare these level descriptions with North American college years. Assuming a 15-week semester with 4 hours per week, the average college contains a total of 120 hours. According to this calculation, the first two years of college are equivalent to the European beginning level, and the third and fourth college year would be equivalent to the intermediate level.

In the light of these findings, it is quite disturbing to note that compared to their EFL counterparts, our university students, given a 15 week semester with three hours of English class per week in the first year, are not given the sufficient training to move on to the higher levels of proficiency. This problem is aggravated by the fact that there is no follow up instruction for oral communication classes in the second year.

Summary and conclusions

In addition to exploiting research studies that focus explicitly on developmental sequences, I suggested the need for a realistic analysis of student needs and language capabilities. We need to evaluate realistically what students can do at each proficiency level and how each level relates to one another, given the distinct lexical, phonological, morphological demands for each stage. Knowing precisely what learners can do at each language stage is essential with respect to planning and designing our curriculum. Ideally we also need to continue to develop increasingly more sensitive instruments to validate results of yearly language achievements of each group of ESL students in the different proficiency levels.

Specifically this present study argued that beginning language instruction (first and second year in the university) might profit considerably from a more phonological approach to the teaching of speaking, including the teaching of speaking grammar. Based on knowledge of which grammar structures are commonly controlled at which level of oral proficiency and at various semester levels, the grammatical coverage of the first-year language program can be partially restructured.

Furthermore, we need a framework within which to interpret findings from FL acquisition research. The results of this kind of -descriptive- research would give materials and curriculum designers valuable information for creating new and it is hoped more effective sequences of textbooks and curriculum.

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