

Teaching
and Learning English
in Secondary Education

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Teaching and Learning English in Secondary Education

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Table of contents

<i>Introduction</i>	11
How to use this book	13

PART I

WHAT IS THE LANGUAGE LEARNER LIKE?

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING PRINCIPLES

1. <i>Theories behind language learning: how languages are learnt</i>	17
1.1. The product of language learning	17
1.2. Language learning and the mind	19
1.2.1. Neurological level: the critical period and fossilisation	21
1.2.2. Phonological level: phonological deafness and sieve	22
1.2.3. The personal and social level	24
1.3. The learning process frameworks	25
1.4. Implications for teaching	29
1.4.1. Implications of the product of language learning	29
1.4.2. Implications of language learning and the mind	30
1.4.3. To finish: implications of the learning framework	33
Self-assessment questions	34

2. Second language learning	37
2.1. The role of the first language in second language learning	37
2.1.1. The use of the first language: an open debate	38
2.1.2. When to use the first language?	39
2.2. Interlanguage	41
2.3. The order of acquisition in a second language	45
2.4. Factors that affect learners' success in learning a second language	48
2.4.1. Sex/gender	49
2.4.2. Personality	49
2.4.3. Intrinsic motivation and attitude	50
2.4.4. Innate aptitude for language learning and intelligence	52
2.4.5. Learning styles	53
2.4.6. To finish: other variables	56
Self-assessment questions	56

PART II

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO TEACH?

APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGIES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

3. Communicative Language Teaching	61
3.1. Communicative Language Teaching and the aim of teaching a second language	61
3.1.1. What is Communicative Language Teaching?	62
3.2. Language in the Communicative Language Teaching class	64
3.2.1. The notion of communicative competence	64
3.2.2. Communicative competence and plurilingual competence	67
3.2.3. The language skills	69
3.3. Fluency and the negotiation of meaning	71
3.4. Characteristics of activities in Communicative Language Teaching	73
3.5. To finish: challenges in Communicative Language Teaching	76
Self-assessment questions	77

4. <i>The Communicative Approach and the origins of Communicative Language Teaching</i>	79
4.1. Second language teaching before the Communicative Approach ...	79
4.1.1. The Grammar-Translation or Classical Method	81
4.1.2. Other developments in second language teaching at the turn of the 20 th century	82
4.1.3. Structural approaches to second language teaching: the Audiolingual Method and Situational Language Teaching	83
4.2. The Communicative Approach	85
4.2.1. Linguistic competence vs. communicative competence	86
4.2.2. The notional syllabus and the Threshold Level	90
4.3. Methodologies deriving from the Communicative Approach in the early years	91
4.4. To finish: from the Communicative Approach to Communicative Language Teaching	94
Self-assessment questions	96
5. <i>Second language teaching nowadays</i>	97
5.1. The action-based approach in the CEFRL	97
5.2. Recent methodologies in second language teaching	99
5.2.1. Proposals based on theories of language and language learning	99
5.2.2. Proposals drawn from general theories in education ..	101
5.2.3. ICT and technology enhanced language learning	105
5.3. The role of methods in current language teaching	106
5.3.1. The post-method condition	107
5.3.2. How to apply a principled approach to second language teaching	109
5.4. Doing reflective teaching	112
5.4.1. Research in action	114
5.5. To finish: where to begin	116
Self-assessment questions	117
6. <i>Learning a language through tasks</i>	119
6.1. The importance of tasks in second language teaching	119

6.2. What is Task-based Language Teaching and where does it come from?	121
6.2.1. The origins of Task-based Language Teaching	123
6.2.2. The theoretical support for Task-based Language Teaching	124
6.3. The design features of a task	126
6.4. Types of tasks	129
6.5. Providing support for doing a task	133
6.6. Planning lessons in Task-based Language Teaching	134
6.7. To finish: challenges in Task-based Language Teaching	136
Self-assessment questions	137

PART III

HOW TO TEACH ENGLISH IN SECONDARY EDUCATION? HANDS ON TEACHING, ASSESSING AND LESSON PLANNING

7. <i>Teaching the skills and the language system</i>	141
7.1. The language learning strategies	141
7.2. Developing the four language skills	144
7.2.1. Practising and developing writing skills	145
7.2.2. Practising and developing reading skills	147
7.2.3. Practising and developing oral skills: oral production and interaction	150
7.2.4. Practising and developing listening skills	153
7.3. Teaching the language system	156
7.3.1. How to teach grammar	157
7.3.2. How to teach vocabulary	159
7.4. To finish: making sense of language practice	162
Self-assessment questions	163
8. <i>Assessment</i>	165
8.1. Assessment vs. evaluation; basic concepts on assessment	165
8.2. Assessment according to the CEFRL	168
8.2.1. Validity, reliability and feasibility in assessment	171
8.3. Assessment procedures in second language teaching	173
8.3.1. Observation-driven assessment	174
8.3.2. Formal testing	175

Table of contents

8.3.3. Assessing the oral skills	176
8.3.4. Checking progress	177
8.4. Rubrics	178
8.4.1. The holistic rubric	179
8.4.2. The analytic rubric	180
8.5. Types of assessment	181
8.6. To finish: putting everything together	184
Self-assessment questions	185
9. Planning for the short term and classroom management	187
9.1. Planning and teaching	187
9.2. The lesson plan: main elements	188
9.2.1. Objectives in a lesson plan	189
9.2.2. Contents in a lesson plan	190
9.2.3. How to deal with competences in planning	192
9.2.4. Preparing activities for a lesson plan	194
9.2.5. How to reflect assessment in a lesson plan	196
9.3. Grouping lessons into didactic units	197
9.4. Classroom management	199
9.4.1. The teacher's presence in the classroom	200
9.4.2. Managing students	202
9.4.3. Managing classroom space	203
9.5. To finish: an example of a lesson plan	204
9.5.1. Objectives in the sample lesson plan	205
9.5.2. Contents in the sample lesson plan	205
9.5.3. Competences in the sample lesson plan	206
9.5.4. Activities in the sample lesson plan	206
9.5.5. Assessment in the sample lesson plan	208
Self-assessment questions	208
10. Long-term planning: syllabus design	211
10.1. What is a syllabus?	211
10.2. Justifying and contextualising a syllabus	212
10.2.1. Writing the justification	213
10.2.2. Writing about the context	214
10.3. Planning and regulatory documents	216
10.3.1. Legislative context and theoretical framework	216
10.3.2. Objectives in syllabus design	217

Teaching and Learning English in Secondary Education

10.3.3. Contents in syllabus design	218
10.3.4. Competences in syllabus design	220
10.4. Methodology and resources in the syllabus	221
10.4.1. Teaching principles and methodologies	221
10.4.2. Human and material resources	222
10.5. The role of evaluation and assessment in the syllabus	223
10.5.1. Learning standards and assessment criteria	226
10.5.2. Marking referents and assessment tools	227
10.6. Catering for diversity	228
10.7. To finish: the teaching profession in secondary	231
Self-assessment questions	232
<i>Key to self-assessment questions</i>	233
<i>Practical tasks: suggested answers</i>	235
<i>Recommended bibliography</i>	245

2

Second language learning

In the specialised literature you will find various acronyms that stand for different ways of referring to teaching/learning English as a global language for communication: EFL (English as a Foreign language), ESL (English as a Second Language), ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), to name a few. Although there are slight differences among these terms, they have something in common: they refer to the process of teaching English to learners who have already acquired an L1. This is the situation where you will find yourself when you teach English in secondary school. As we saw in the previous chapter, having a complete L1 system undeniably influences the development of other languages, and this makes L2 learning a field of study in its own right. In this chapter we will take a close look at the peculiarities of learning a language as an additional one, when the first language system is 'already there'. More precisely, we will analyse the role of the L1 in L2 classes; then you will be introduced to the notion of learner's interlanguage and the study of the order of acquisition in an L2; finally, we will look into the individual factors that affect L2 learning, such as personality and motivation.

2.1. The role of the first language in second language learning

We have seen that the differences between the languages we already know and the target language can be a source of mistakes that mainly affects pronunciation, grammatical structures and vocabulary, for example in the case of false friends. But in fact, the L1 can both hinder and facilitate the learning of the target language. For example, Spanish speakers have a great potential knowledge of English vo-

cabulary due to cognates (i.e. words in both languages that are related in origin), and English grammatical structures are easier for them to learn than for speakers of more distant languages. They can easily deduce the meaning of many of the approximately 15,000 words of Latin origin belonging to the English lexicon, but they will also say **make a photo* instead of *take a photo* more often than not. And Japanese students struggle with the articles *a/the*, while Spaniards learn their use quickly, yet tend to add the article *the* incorrectly when they speak about things in general: **I like the coffee*. All these phenomena are caused by the L1, which influences the learning process of the L2 either positively or negatively.

■ Practical task 2.1

Reflect on the following statement: 'the more languages a person knows, the easier and faster she will learn a new one'. Do you agree? Why do you think so? How do you think knowing other languages affects learning the pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar of a new one?

2.1.1. *The use of the first language: an open debate*

Linguists have studied the relationship between L1 and L2 for a long time. For language teachers, one of the most relevant contributions of these research findings is the information on the role that the L1 should play in the teaching process. Should we forbid the L1 in our classrooms? Is it reasonable to use it to explain a certain structure if this clearly saves time and helps understanding it? Is it appropriate to provide the translation of an unknown word instead of explaining it in the L2? Should we allow students to use their L1 in some cases, then?

The most honest answer to these questions is simple: we are not completely sure. This is one of the most controversial areas in L2 teaching, and possibly the most studied in recent decades. There is a large amount of literature with very firm opinions on both sides of the argument, as a result of which we cannot draw a definitive conclusion.

The evolution of this debate can be summarised as follows: one of the first language teaching methods was the so-called Grammar-Translation or Classical Method, whose lessons were taught entirely in the L1. This method was focused on learning grammar structures and vocabulary and, as its name suggests, involved the translation of texts (more about this method in Chapter 4). Although it may seem out-dated today, we must take into account that the aim of Grammar-Translation was not to hold conversations in any language, but to learn how to read texts in Latin and Ancient Greek. As a reaction to the shortfalls of Grammar-Translation

for teaching modern languages, new methodologies were designed that focused on the oral use of language, which rejected previous procedures completely. These methodologies evolved, especially during the second half of the 20th century, following different objectives and dynamics. Nevertheless, most of them shared a common principle: the L1 was to be barred both from the classroom and from study materials. As a consequence, language teachers have been trained for decades in the belief that any use of the L1 in the classroom was malpractice. Not only should they avoid it, but they also had to foster the use of the L2 among the students vigorously.

By the end of the 20th century, new research began to question whether the rigidity of this approach was scientifically grounded, that is, whether using the L1 was detrimental for learning. At the time, a new trend started to defend taking advantage of L1 knowledge for L2 learning—a potential that, in the opinion of its supporters, had been unfairly disregarded. For their part, the followers of the prohibitionist stance argued that using the L2 exclusively also served to set discipline and certain habits in the classroom, especially in formal education. A clash broke out between advocates and opponents of the L1, which remains unresolved to date.

The current trend in EFL classrooms seems to be to encourage the L2 as much as possible, but to allow the cautious and controlled practice of the L1, establishing rules concerning its use amongst teachers and students alike. This is the approach that we favour too. The L1 appears to be relatively common to explain the assessment scheme on the first days of class, for classroom management and for giving instructions to carry out an activity. With controversies, teachers also turn to the L1 to provide the translation of an unknown word if the meaning is compromised through the L2 or to make comparisons between grammatical structures in both languages. It is less common to explain grammatical structures in the L1 only, although this is accepted with beginners. As for students, it is considered that they should be encouraged to speak in the L2 at all times, except when this may cause anxiety, i.e. for clarifications on important matters. In the following sections, we will discuss the use of the L1 by teachers and students in more detail.

2.1.2. When to use the first language?

Interestingly, despite the fact that many teachers have been trained under the axiom ‘the L1 should be banned in the classroom’, the L1 is much generalised. L2 teachers seem to establish their own methods for allowing the L1 in their classes, based on the analysis of their groups—students’ age, competence level and degree of heterogeneity—or the purpose of communication, among other factors. Yet, possibly due to their training, they tend to perceive this as incorrect.

Galindo Merino (2012) offers an in-depth analysis of teachers’ beliefs and the real use of the L1. One of the most interesting studies that she reviews is

Nussbaum’s (1991), which recounts that teachers ‘confess’ to having used the L1 as a last resort when clarifying comprehension or issues pertaining to the group as a whole. The word *confess* clearly alludes to this collective feeling of regarding L1 use as something *bad*, despite the fact that most teachers turn or consent to it when they deem necessary.

There is no set of golden rules to establish the proportion of L1 that should be implemented. The role that the L1 will play in your work is something that you will have to decide for yourself, according to the analysis of your classroom situation. Keep in mind that reference documents in L2 teaching such as the CEFRL do not exclude the L1 from L2 teaching. Quite the contrary, the L1 is now considered part of the language user’s plurilingual competence, and plays a role in the macro-competence of mediation (more in Chapter 3). In Table 2.1 below, we present the most common reasons and situations that lead to using the L1 (Galindo Merino, 2012).

TABLE 2.1. *Reasons and situations when the L1 tends to be used*

<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
The teacher uses it	Establishing rules Maintaining discipline in the classroom Managing the class Saving time Providing explanations Making verifications Encouraging and checking comprehension in L2 discourse Expressing contents Translating vocabulary and structures
The teacher allows students to use it	Reducing emotional barriers and anxiety Serving as a security tool for the student Establishing individual contact with students Interacting with classmates Reflecting upon the learning process Increasing students’ awareness on similarities and differences Developing multilingual awareness and competence

■ Practical task 2.2

Some teachers tend to praise students in the L2 but scold them in the L1. Why do you think this is so? What is your stance and your experience on the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom?

2.2. Interlanguage

In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of studies published by Stephen Pit Corder and Larry Selinker brought about a paradigm shift in the conception of errors in L2 learning. Previously, errors had been a central object of study for Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis, two branches of Applied Linguistics whose objective is to be able to predict students' errors in order to address them through formal instruction (see Chapter 1). To achieve this goal, Contrastive Analysis looks into the similarities and differences between L1 and L2, while Error Analysis classifies the most frequent errors of learners into linguistic categories, usually depending on their L1, to be able to make predictions based on statistics.

The theories of Corder and Selinker took an important step in another direction. Instead of analysing errors exclusively in order to correct them, this new tendency consisted in seeing errors as a natural part of the learning process and considering their study vital to understanding how L2 learning procedures work. More specifically, these scholars maintained that studying errors was possibly the best way to determine exactly how much L2 learners knew.

One of the most influential publications on this matter is the one by Selinker (1972). There, he put forward the term *interlanguage* to refer to a learner's own language system in each phase of its development. According to Selinker's Interlanguage Hypothesis, the learner's discourse is not a defective model of the L2 'contaminated' by the L1, but rather it is an autonomous set of rules specific to every person at a given moment, and in constant evolution throughout time. So, we could say that an interlanguage is the language of a single individual, unique and personal, which is similar enough to the L2 to make oneself understood by speakers of that language, to different degrees.

Remember

As stated by the Interlanguage Hypothesis, the language of L2 learners is not an imperfect version of the native speakers' language.

The Interlanguage Hypothesis distinguishes five psycholinguistic processes that are central to L2 learning and shape a person's interlanguage:

- Native language transfer.
- Transfer of training.
- Strategies of L2 learning.
- Strategies of L2 communication.
- Overgeneralisation.

Next, we will briefly explain these processes, illustrating them with examples of frequent errors made by English language users whose first language is Spanish. It should be noted that we are referring to errors in language production, with a special focus on those that occur in spontaneous speech; comprehension errors are not included in this analysis.

A. *Native language transfer*

The Interlanguage Hypothesis rejects the notion that the mother tongue is the sole source of errors, but does not deny the fact that learners transfer knowledge from their developed language system (L1) to the one they are developing (L2).

EXAMPLE 2.1

Examples of native language transfer from Spanish into English are:

- Introducing the sound /e/ at the beginning of words that begin with /s/ followed by a consonant (*Mike /e/speaks /e/Spanish*).
 - Using the verb in the singular with 'people' (**People is*).
-

B. *Transfer of training*

Transfer of training means that the student erroneously transfers a rule she has learnt through formal instruction, due to the way in which it was presented.

EXAMPLE 2.2

The structures for expressing condition are relatively similar in English and Spanish. However, in order to avoid the L1 at all costs, EFL textbooks often explain them like this: the 1st conditional is used to express 'a present/future situation of *high* probability' and the 2nd conditional is used in 'a present/future situation of *low* probability'.

Even though this explanation is technically true, analysing the chances for a situation to take place is a very subjective undertaking. For this reason, the rule

may be applied erroneously. Yet, when comparing the English conditional with the equivalent structure in Spanish, which learners can handle competently, errors tend to be reduced.

C. *Strategies of L2 learning*

In the Interlanguage Hypothesis, the learning strategies pertain to the rules created by the learner as a result of her attempts to infer and simplify L2 learning. Using mnemonics is an example of an L2 learning strategy. The rules of a student's interlanguage that are the same as those of the L2 are a product of applying successful learning strategies (more on learning strategies in Chapter 7).

D. *Strategies of L2 communication*

This refers to the processes that learners put into practice in order to communicate, especially when they do not have the necessary vocabulary. These strategies include: using periphrases (i.e. *my sister's husband* for *brother-in-law*), inventing terms that convey the meaning of an unknown lexical item (for example, saying *bank-machine* instead of ATM), taking words from one's L1, and using non-verbal language.

E. *Overgeneralisation*

Overgeneralisation is the use of a grammatical rule in cases where it is not applicable. This process also happens when we learn our L1, and it indicates that we are making progress in the generation of rules. They can be frequently traced in the use of regular patterns in place of irregular expressions, such as the plural **sheeps* or the past **thoughted*.

■ Practical task 2.3

Can you think of other examples of native language transfer from Spanish into English? What about other examples of overgeneralisation, for example from children learning Spanish as their L1?

 SUGGESTED ANSWER

The main difference between a developed language system and an interlanguage is that the latter is autonomous and much more permeable to changes and restructurings. Besides, one of the most interesting characteristics of an interlanguage is that it is simultaneously systematic and variable. It is systematic in the sense that it has a solid set of rules, and variable because such rules are not always applied, or at least not in the same fashion. In your classes, you will notice that students will sometimes use expressions like **he say that...*, although at other times they will correctly add the *-s* to mark the third person in the present tense. This is puzzling, as the rule is fairly simple, the students may know it perfectly well, have no problem in using it in controlled writing, and could even explain it to a classmate. Still, it is not always seen in their utterances. How to interpret this? Simply, as a natural phase of the learning process. As our interlanguage evolves, unless rules become fossilised, they will eventually stop being variable and become part of our L2 repertoire.

One of the objectives of the Interlanguage Hypothesis is being able to define the extent to which a learner knows the L2 depending on her errors. It is not clear whether this can be completely achieved. Nonetheless, the processes recounted by Selinker are helpful for course design, e.g. for thinking of learning activities. Take for example the popular game *Taboo*, in which participants have to explain something without using certain words that they would normally need to do so. This game replicates a real situation that tends to happen when we want to express a difficult concept in the L2. Both in the game and in real-life, we can resort to periphrases and other communication techniques that could be part of the communication strategies described by Selinker, so this can be a good activity for students' interlanguage to evolve.

As it happens with all the highly influential theories, the Interlanguage Hypothesis is not exempt from criticism. One of the most important, reflected in the work of Jordan (2004) and Al-Khresheh (2015), is that it makes use of the term *hypothesis* too loosely, as it is practically impossible to prove or refute it. In other words, it is very difficult to show whether there exists a language system separate from the L1 and the L2 in a person's mind. Another objection is that the five processes outlined by Selinker are not clearly defined. As a result, sometimes it is complicated to distinguish unambiguously whether the cause of an error is L1 transfer or overgeneralisation, for example.

For you, as a teacher, the main contribution of the Interlanguage Hypothesis is the change in perspective from seeing students' language as a by-product of the L2 to considering it as a language in its own right. Yes, teachers have to pay attention to errors in order to avoid fossilisation, but we also know that some errors are a tangible proof that students are making progress—e.g. overgeneralising is a sign that rules are being produced. The theories of Selinker can help you hold reasonable expectations of the interlanguage process of a particular student, to pinpoint her knowledge at a moment in time, and to decide what and how to teach this student.

2.3. The order of acquisition in a second language

When we learn language structures we follow a series of sequential phases. Not only does empirical evidence support the existence of these phases, but it also posits that their order cannot be altered. The first studies on this matter dug into the developmental sequences of an L1. Later, this was confirmed for L2 acquisition as well, upon observing that L2 students would acquire the language in a given order, regardless of the order in which it was taught. This is particularly significant in Krashen's Natural Order Hypothesis, which we mentioned in Chapter 1 and will refer to again in Chapter 4.

One of the most studied structures in terms of order of acquisition is *negation* in English. For this particular structure, the scholarly literature has shown that all the subjects studied, regardless of their mother tongue, follow a predetermined four-phase pattern, summarised in Table 2.2.

TABLE 2.2. *Phases followed in the acquisition of negation*

Stage	Linguistic description	Example
1	Use of the negative <i>no</i> with other elements	*I no go *No I like
2	Inclusion of <i>no</i> , <i>not</i> , <i>don't</i> , with random use	*I don't can go *I no can go
3	Inclusion of contraction <i>-n't</i> with auxiliary and modal verbs, non-internalised use of <i>doesn't</i>	I can't go I don't go *She don't go
4	Correct use of the negative <i>not</i> with the auxiliary <i>do</i> in different tenses	She doesn't go I didn't go

Other investigations have also detected that the L1 has a bearing on the speed at which learners advance from one phase to the next. Table 2.3 shows the order of acquisition of *interrogatives* for learners of English as an L2. This sequence is very similar to the one registered in the development of children who speak English as an L1. However, it has been observed that learners spend more time in one phase or another depending on how similar the structure is to their L1.

TABLE 2.3. *Phases followed in the acquisition of interrogatives*
(adapted from Lightbown and Spada, 2013)

Stage	Linguistic description	Example
1	Single words Formulae Sentence fragments	Dog? Four children? What's that?
2	No inversion No fronting	It's a monster in the corner? The boys throw the shoes?
3	<i>Do</i> -fronting <i>Wh</i> -fronting without inversion Other fronting	*Do you have a shoes on your picture? *Where the children are playing? *Does in this picture there is astronauts?
4	Inversion in <i>wh</i> - + copula <i>Yes/no</i> questions with auxiliaries	Where is the sun? Is there a fish in the water?
5	Inversion in <i>wh</i> - questions with both an auxiliary and a main verb	How do you say 'fig'? What's the boy doing?
6	Question tags Negative questions Embedded questions	It's better, isn't it? Why can't you go? Can you tell me what day is today?

Unsurprisingly, when these discoveries were made, they gave way to changes in the order of course contents in syllabus design. One of the most influential works in this field is the Teachability Hypothesis, formulated by Pienemann in 1989 in an article with the intriguing title: *Is language teachable?* The Teachability Hypothesis 'predicts that instruction can only promote language acquisition if the interlanguage is close to the point when the structure to be taught is acquired in the natural setting' (Ellis, 1997, p. 82). In other words, the learner will acquire a given language item only when she has acquired the preceding language items in the natural order.

In light of this hypothesis, many teachers and syllabus designers revisited their syllabi and started to consider teaching proposals based on presenting course contents in a specific order depending on the optimal moment to deal with them in terms of acquisition. The new possibilities were promising for increasing learning efficiency. Nevertheless, they entailed a devastating corollary: if we learn structures following a predetermined and unalterable sequence, then does it make sense to teach grammar?

As we saw in Chapter 1, the position of Krashen and other linguists was to reject the explicit teaching of grammar almost entirely in favour of implicit acquisition. Yet, the most widespread opinion nowadays is that it does make sense to teach grammar (see Chapter 7 to find out more about this). The order of acquisition seems to be predetermined, that seems clear; but even though no phase can be skipped, explicit instruction can accelerate learning and help consolidate knowledge. One

of the most interesting teaching proposals in this respect is that of Robert Ellis (2003), who puts forward the concept *consciousness-raising*. Ellis accepts this pre-determined order and assumes that it is pointless to try to teach students a structure before they are prepared for it. As a solution, he suggests raising learners' awareness of the rules, without necessarily forcing them to apply them. This awareness will help students to incorporate the rule into their interlanguage when they are ready.

Some suggestions for consciousness-raising with a written text are shown in Table 2.4 (you have another example in Chapter 3).

TABLE 2.4. *Suggestions to encourage consciousness-raising (adapted from Willis and Willis, 1996)*

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Procedure: ask your students to...</i>
Identify / consolidate	Identify different uses of the word <i>would</i> Find examples of conditional sentences
Classify (semantic; structural)	List all the words related to food Find adjectives of personality traits in the text and tell your classmates which could apply to you
Hypothesis building / checking	Make a generalisation about language and check this against more language data
Cross-language exploration	Compare the uses of the words <i>must / mustn't</i> with the Spanish equivalent

As can be observed, these activities do not make the student use the new content. Instead, they are meant to reflect upon it. Some of these reflections are analyses of a linguistic nature (i.e. identify the uses of *would*) but others are examples of experiential learning, such as the semantic classification where the student puts adjectives in relation to her own life.

Remember

Consciousness-raising tasks help students reflect on the rules of language, so that they can include these rules in their interlanguage when they are ready.

In your experience as a teacher or a student, you must have noticed that it is common practice to expect students to use what they have just been taught straight

away—particularly in the case of grammatical structures or vocabulary. Normally, students are asked to do a set of controlled practice exercises and then practise the lexical items or structures in a production activity, whether oral or written. For instance, you may have seen some of these exercises for controlled practice:

- Fill in the gap with the appropriate word (cloze tests).
- Make a sentence out of cue words.
- Rewrite a sentence using a certain word.
- Rearrange mixed or scrambled sentences.
- Describe what you can see. Begin with *there is/are*.
- Choose among a number of options (multiple-choice exercises).

Many teachers think that practice is the key to learning and that acquisition is ultimately revealed when the student is able to use the new content correctly in her speech. Yet, research suggests that the intellectual effort of classifying vocabulary into whether ‘it defines me/does not define me’ is as effective for learning as using it in an exercise (Schmitt, 2010). Similarly, including a structure in a composition following instructions does not necessarily imply that this structure will be used again naturally. It is a source of frustration for teachers to expose their students to lots of practice of a structure and then see that they do not use it in spontaneous speech. But the literature on the order of acquisition suggests that this may not be because the teacher has assigned poor or insufficient exercises and activities; it is simply that the student is not ready to incorporate that structure into her interlanguage.

Should we abandon controlled practice? Absolutely not. It does help and, more importantly, it speeds up the learning process. This being said, we should be aware of the fact that practice is not the ultimate solution, and that results will be seen at the right time. If the student has demonstrated that she understands a language item, uses it correctly in controlled exercises and activities for freer production, and still does not bring it up in conversation on her own will, perhaps the best strategy is to give her time. Moreover, we should abandon ‘the exaggerated claim that “practice makes perfect” and content ourselves with the expectation that practice, like explanation of rules, can make a significant contribution to good learning and is therefore worth including in our teaching’ (Ur, 2012, p. 79).

2.4. Factors that affect learners’ success in learning a second language

In a class, you will not only find students who know more than their classmates, but also students who learn faster or better. This can occur on a general level as well as in specific areas of the language. You must have surely heard expressions such as ‘So-and-so is very good at languages’, ‘she has a good ear’, ‘she remembers vocabulary straight away’. These refer to people who have ‘a gift’ for learning different features