



**MA Public Adult Education
Professional Development System**

A PUBLIC ADULT EDUCATION OF MA PROGRAM

Transcript – How Do Adults Learn English – Principles of Second Language Acquisition – Theories and Theorists

There are at least 40 second language acquisition (SLA) theories and theorists, and as many teaching approaches that emerged from them. SLA theories draw from many disciplines, including psychology, linguistics, sociology, and neuroscience. We will start with a historical overview of some of the most popular theories and approaches to SLA.

In this video, you will hear about and consider the main theories and theorists from the 1950s and 60s through to the present day, and we will briefly mention approaches attached to each of these theories. During the virtual sessions, we will discuss in more depth some of the key enduring teaching approaches that emerged from the theories.

This would be a good time to print out the SLA principles and theories chart provided in your Blackboard course. It contains more information than what is covered in this presentation and will be a handy tool to reference as we make our way through.

We will begin our discussion with a look at one of the oldest theories, the Grammar Translation Method. One of the earliest methods used to teach English was called the Grammar Translation Method. With this method, early English language teachers attempted to teach using the same approach that was used to teach foreign languages like Greek and Latin. Students primarily translated texts and attempted to learn about grammar or language in this way. Very little focus was put on oral communication in the target language.

Think of how Latin was and is taught. Perhaps some of you are old enough to have been taught French or German in this way—conjugating verbs, translating reading passages, and filling out worksheets. With the Grammar Translation Method, the rules and vocabulary of the language are taught apart from any actual communicative activity. The class is teacher-fronted, as the teacher usually provides most of the information and does most of the talking. As a student, you follow a pattern, typically filling in worksheets and studying translated vocabulary lists to show your understanding.

This structure-based approach focuses mainly on teaching students about the language, but not necessarily on how to use the language to communicate. Take a moment to consider this structure-based approach. Do you use any of these Grammar Translation activities in your classroom? For example, do you teach grammar rules, utilize vocabulary lists, or worksheets? Is your class sometimes teacher-fronted, with more speaking in direction from the teacher than the students?

No doubt some of these techniques are problematic or outdated—sure they are—but are they useful? Absolutely. None of these individual approaches from the Grammar Translation Method are in and of themselves bad. Many of these techniques and approaches have their place in the classroom. For example, knowing some rules is helpful. Authentic, targeted, student-generated vocabulary lists may assist in learning. Teaching grammar when appropriate, as it comes up within a contextualized, theme-based lesson, or to help with accuracy of speech or self-editing written work, is very important if this is not the only method being used.

Some aspects from this method can serve a purpose. They help language learners know that there are grammatical rules and how to apply them. For example, this ability, known as language awareness, can help learners speak and write with more accuracy.

The Theory of Behaviorism in SLA looks at language, as the name implies, as a behavior to be learned. Behaviorists believe that adults can learn language in the same way that children learn. Behaviorists are also sometimes referred to as structural linguists because they, like Grammar Translationists, believe that learning or memorizing the structural patterns and sentences will support language development.

The Direct Method and the Audiolingual Approach to language teaching were developed from behaviorist ideas. The Direct Method focuses on oral production and introduces the notion of only using the target language during instruction. It teaches vocabulary through pantomiming, real-life objects, and visual materials, and teaches grammar through an inductive approach—having students discover grammar rules through sufficient examples in the target language.

The Audiolingual Approach stresses habit formation through listening, memorizing, and repeating language. Teachers present a model of a correct sentence, and students repeat and memorize it without necessarily understanding the meaning. Early behaviorist theorists believed humans could be trained to learn language through reinforcement: correct usage received positive feedback, and incorrect usage received negative feedback.

The Audiolingual Method was also called the Army Method, as it was how Americans were taught foreign languages for service. The Pimsleur Method is one example of this approach. The Berlitz Method combines both the Direct and the Audiolingual approaches.

Neither the Direct Method nor the Audiolingual Approach is ideal for encouraging communicative competence, but minimally, learners are able to practice speaking the language. Neither approach places heavy emphasis on reading or writing, although later series from Berlitz began to include these skills.

You might think the Audiolingual Approach seems old-fashioned or outdated. Does it still have a place in today's classroom? Yes. Examples of appropriate use include reciting scripts to aid fluency, memorizing vocabulary in student-centered, authentic, and theme-based contexts, and using choral repetition for speaking and pronunciation practice. These exercises are particularly helpful for students uncomfortable with speaking.

Contrasting with and in response to behaviorist theories, cognitivist theorists view language not as a behavior to be learned, but as an innate ability to be developed through cognitive thought processes. The learner is viewed as a thinker and processor of information.

Noam Chomsky, a linguist and scientist, was a leader in cognitivism. He described language learning in a more complex and creative way than simply a behavior to be learned. He believed the human brain is primed to create and use language.

The Naturalist Approach to language teaching emerged from this thinking, with the idea that learners do not need to be taught grammar or vocabulary separately but instead require a low-stress environment providing comprehensible input to naturally acquire language.

While Chomsky focused mostly on first language acquisition, Stephen Krashen, another cognitive linguist, built on Chomsky's work for second language acquisition. Krashen emphasized the importance of rich language input. Meryl Swain highlighted the importance of the learner's language production, or output.

Constructivists built on cognitivism but stressed that interaction in language acquisition is key. Students must engage and use the language in genuine communicative situations to really learn it. By engaging authentically, students learn to construct the meaning of words and concepts by assimilating prior knowledge and new information.

Michael Long is notable for the Interaction Hypothesis, which places importance on face-to-face interaction. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged from these combined theories, with the ultimate goal of communicative competence.

CLT focuses on meaningful communication over the structure of language. Its syllabus is functional rather than structural. Students are given authentic interactive tasks to work together to discover, use, and produce new language. Classes are student-centered, with the teacher as facilitator rather than director. Brown (2007) defined CLT as an approach emphasizing authenticity, interaction, student-centered learning, task-based activities, and real-world meaningful communication.

Criticisms of CLT include that fluency is prioritized over accuracy. However, its advantages include a holistic approach that grows from learners' interests and needs, and task-based activities that create motivation and liveliness in the classroom.

Sociocultural theorists contributed to the idea that interaction plays a key role in learning. They posit that people learn within their Zone of Proximal Development—skills just beyond their current level, through interactions with teachers or more experienced peers who model and support more complex language and thinking.

This is similar to Krashen’s “i+1” theory, where students are provided information just above their current level in a relaxed environment to help acquisition. Sociocultural concepts include collaborative learning, discourse analysis, holistic approaches to language education, and understanding that language is mediated by culture.

Neuroscience research supports many SLA theories, including behaviorist practices like recall drills and quizzes, which are effective for long-term memory. Retrieval, generating authentic meaning, and varied repetitive practice across modalities also strengthen long-term memory. Brain research supports constructivist values like productive struggle, pattern seeking, and information organizing, which build neural networks and enhance learning.

We will end this introduction with a reminder that today’s ESL practitioners draw from a rich and varied body of SLA research and evidence-based practices. Although there isn’t a single theory explaining everything about SLA, research-based consensus emphasizes the importance of authentic, meaningful interaction in language acquisition—most evident in communicative approaches.

Please think about and make notes on any final thoughts or questions you have regarding these main research theories. Consider which theories or theorists resonate with you, which you would like more information on, and how this theoretical information might impact your practice. In upcoming sessions, we will discuss communicative approaches and principles, including comprehensible input and output, the affective filter, and learning versus acquisition.

Thank you so much.