Chapter 40
One Size Does Not Fit All:
Learning to Tailor Instruction to the Needs of Asian EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

Past research often neglected to examine the unique factors influencing linguistic development in EFL environments. Modern research, however, is beginning to recognize and investigate these factors. The purpose of this chapter is to examine key differences in Asian EFL contexts that require pedagogical reforms. Review of these contexts has revealed three main issues: a dearth of input, an absence of authentic opportunities for practice, and the prevalence of cultural and historical traditions (e.g., Confucianism) that make adapting communicative techniques a challenge. Ways to reform input, cultivate metacognitive awareness, utilize technology, and provide social skills training have been proposed according to the unique needs within Asian EFL settings.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the years, researchers and educators have debated the importance of nature vs. nurture in the language learning process. Early in the 20th century, theorists felt that nurture, represented by the spoken or written input provided by caregivers, was the main determinant of language learning. Proponents of this view, called behaviorists, posited that language was primarily molded through reinforcement of spoken and written stimuli (Guasti, 2004).

As behaviorist theories of language learning became more widespread, researchers began to realize that the presentation of language features and imitation alone could not adequately describe processes of linguistic development. As pointed out by Newport, Gleitman, and Gleitman (1977), imitation of parent's speech cannot explain the novel utterances of young children. Language learners often construct utterances such as, "I no go," which are never spoken by their caregivers. Language learners may also overgeneralize grammatical features such as the past tense, constructing verbs like *goed* for *went* and *singed* for *sang* (Guasti, 2004). Due to the issues positing that language learning is a process of imitation, researchers began to conclude that there was little or no relationship between input, habit formation, and language acquisition (Newport & Gleitman,

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1977). Theorists such as Chomsky (1975, 1981, 1986) developed cognitive models of linguistic development, which posited that all learners acquire language naturally through an innate, universal language acquisition device. Such theories downplayed the importance of the environment in the language learning process. From this period onward, researchers expanded upon the notions of innate processes that governed the acquisition of grammar, phonology, semantics, and other aspects of the language learning process (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Hoop & Fikkert, 2009; McCarthy, 2004; Mitchell & Myles, 2004; Pinker, 1991, 1994).

While the intense debate concerning innate and environmental characteristics of language learning is an important one, the polarization of researchers toward one of the ideological extremes often served to hinder understanding of research results. In some cases, researchers appear to have "missed the forest for the trees" in their zeal to bolster support for their ideological views. A case in point is a study conducted by Makino (1979) which examined the acquisition order of 9 grammatical features in 777 secondary school students studying in Japan. Despite significant differences in the acquisition order found within this English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment, the prevalence of innate theories of language development at the time compelled researchers to conclude that contextual influences on grammatical development were minimal (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). In actuality, three of the nine features studied, the possessive, article, and progressive auxiliary morphemes, were different from those obtained from English as a Second Language (ESL) settings (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; Makino, 1979). Results of the study appear far too disparate to make such a claim.

More recent studies have identified the importance of examining both innate and environmental influences on linguistic development. Holistic models have now been advanced which help both researchers and educators understand the synergistic involvement of multiple factors (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2005; Kecskes, 2008, 2010; Schenck & Choi, 2012). With a more holistic understanding, researchers have also begun to realize the influence of key environmental differences in an EFL context (Schenck & Choi, 2013). These key differences, along with educational reforms which may be used to address them, will be further examined within Asian countries such as China, Korea, and Japan.

APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Because of the predominance of the nature vs. nurture debate in the language learning process, English instruction was put on a pendulum which periodically swung from a reliance on input and habit formation to dependence on self cultivation and natural development. Initially, in accordance to behaviorist views, English instruction was thought to be something which could be learned through providing appropriate input and reinforcement to enhance language learning. Beginning with the grammar-translation approach, structural analysis of language took on a preeminent role in the classroom. Students learned grammatical rules through explicit instruction, which was followed by written translation exercises that emphasized the target feature. Educators soon realized, however, that students who learned via this approach had extensive knowledge of grammatical rules, but lacked the ability to apply this knowledge to production activities such as speaking or writing (Huang, 2010). In response to such problems, the audiolingual approach was developed. This technique encouraged learners to listen and repeat sentences with various different types of grammar. Although this approach was developed to emphasize the importance of speech, rather than translation, the drill exercises used for speech production remained generally grammatical in nature (Thornbury, 1999). Like students who had learned via the grammar-translation approach, audiolingual learners also had low communicative

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