

# THE EMERGING FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING/LEARNING PARADIGM



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Foreign language instruction has experienced substantial changes during the past 20 years: traditional teaching methods have been questioned, conventional teacher and student roles have been altered, and the number and nature of standard learning/teaching tools has experienced unprecedented growth and transformation. Although our understanding of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) processes is far from complete, recent research is beginning to provide a new theoretical framework (or paradigm) to explain how languages are acquired and, especially, how teachers can support their students' learning processes. This paper presents and summarizes these emerging views on foreign language pedagogy as a response to three of the most pressing questions confronted by teachers today:

1. What is the role of formal classroom instruction in SLA? (Is classroom time obsolete, or can it play an important role in language acquisition?)
2. What is the role of instructors in the foreign language (FL) learning process? (Are we called to be providers of knowledge or designers of learning experiences?)
3. What is the role of new technologies in the emerging pedagogical context? (Are they really helpful or simply expensive substitutes to good instruction?)

## The role of formal classroom instruction

The ability of foreign language instruction to foster proficiency has been questioned numerous times in the past due to changes in both the prevailing views on language and learning, and the foreign language proficiency demands of the moment (Musumeci, 1997). The crisis of the prevailing grammar-translation model in the 1940's; the dissemination of the Audio-lingual Method (ALM) in the 1950's and 60's; and the development of "humanistic" language learning approaches such as the Silent Way and Community Language Learning in the 60's and 70's are recent-history examples of this affirmation (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

One of the most important developments in the field, however, took place in the early 1980's, when the concept of *acquisition* (as opposed to *learning*) and its pedagogical counterpart, the *Natural*

*Approach*, surfaced in the SLA research arena. The basic premise of this new perspective on FL instruction was that learning was a conscious process, yielding linguistic knowledge of little or no communicative value. On the other hand, acquisition was a process that operated at a much deeper (or subconscious) level and was the sole initiator of all second-language utterances (Krashen, 1982). Acquisition processes of a second language were then assumed to follow the same route as those of the first language, a perspective which translated at the pedagogical level into classroom practices aimed at replicating to some degree the conditions of acquisition of the first language (Terrell, 1991).

While colleagues like Krashen and Terrell helped us realize the importance of input and the need to present learners with opportunities to process meaningful information, it was Swain's work that provided another key piece of the puzzle. Although important, input is only part of the acquisition equation. Learners develop foreign language proficiency by actively participating in linguistic exchanges (output) (Swain, 1985).

At the present time, there is increasing consensus about three basic SLA principles:

1. Processing of meaningful information is indeed a crucial aspect of SLA (Krashen, 1995).
2. For input to be processed and absorbed (in other words, for *input* to become *intake*), the structural aspects of the target language (TL) need to be salient and its regularities (or irregularities) made explicit (Van Patten, 1993).
3. Output needs to be coached in a progressively less controlled manner to close the gap between comprehension and production (Rivers, 1994; Ballman, 1998).

Empirical studies suggest that the best curricular organization must include direct instruction and opportunities for meaningful interaction. According to Doughty (1988), and Spada (1990), communicative classrooms that include opportunities for explicit grammar instruction are indeed more effective than traditional grammar-based classroom or immersion programs where explicit grammar instruction is avoided. Swain (1995)

has also found that classroom acquisition is maximized when learners engage in tasks that push them towards the limits of their current competence.

Factors most likely to enhance SLA in instructional contexts (as discussed by researchers such as Ellis, 1990; Nunan, 1999; and Lee, 2000), include:

- Need and desire to communicate (the learner needs to be motivated to participate in challenging exchanges of information).
- Quantity and quality of intake (the target language needs to be present, and its lexical and syntactic qualities have to be noticed and assimilated by the learner to be effective).
- Involvement in a wide range of speech acts (learners need opportunities to practice a wide range of linguistic functions under planned and unplanned conditions).
- Teacher feedback rich in modeling and elaboration (meaningful teacher feedback beyond evaluative statements such as "correct" or "incorrect").

## Implications for grammar instruction

If we view language learning as a process involving the development of communicative skills in a target language, grammar instruction must be conceived as a process aimed at helping learners develop their awareness of both formal and functional aspects of the target language (TL) (Nunan, 1999).

How do we reach this goal? Current literature suggests three basic principles:

1. Functional contextualization
2. Organic management
3. Recycling

**Functional contextualization.** Key to the internalization of the principles that govern the TL is the exposure to meaningful linguistic data (Van Patten, 1993). The processing of incoming language takes place at two levels: semantic (that is meaning) and syntactic (form). Although we can isolate these levels for academic purposes, in reality they are tightly bound and should not be separated when teaching a FL (Halliday, 1985). Meaning or form alone are not sufficient for linguistic development. Both need to

be present at all points of the learning continuum: from exposure to production (Nunan, 1999).

**Organic management.** Should the structure of a language be explored inductively or deductively? Awareness of the structure of the language is commonly accepted as a crucial aspect of the SLA process. For decades this was conceived as the result of direct presentation of the rules and principles that govern the TL. However, a gap between declarative knowledge (the ability to identify errors and state rules) and procedural knowledge (the ability to use that knowledge in communicative situations) was detected (Krashen, 1982; Zhou, 1991). A push for deeper processing of linguistic data led to the development of more inductive approaches to FL instruction. But, in spite of the evidence suggesting that discovered principles had a higher impact on students' output (Hatch and Yoshitomi, 1993), the laborious and time-consuming nature of the inductive method made it inefficient for language instruction (Marton, 1994).

The emerging solution has been articulated in terms of structured input, i.e., a manner of presenting input to make specific structures salient and to permit learners to "discover" the underlying linguistic patterns with the active help and support of the teacher and the learning materials (Van Patten, 1993). The idea is that learners should process linguistic input through tasks specifically designed to highlight and demonstrate the structure and functionality of specific language forms.

Recent studies indicate that language acquisition does not follow a linear route. The development of foreign language proficiency requires an "organic" approach, i.e., a learning path that allows for communication back and forth between the inductive and deductive perspectives. As Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) suggest, learning a language is more like growing a garden than building a wall. Learners need to be nurtured by adequate amounts of meaningful linguistic data, allowing for different aspects of the language to emerge at different times and different rates, with regular gardener interventions (fertilizing, pruning, trimming, etc.) to insure balanced growth.

**Recycling.** For some time it was believed that structures were acquired one at a time, in a building block fashion. The work of Johnston (1987) and Rutheford (1987) suggests that learners actually do not learn one item at a time and that they need opportunities to recycle language forms.

Key to the pedagogical paradigm that we are carrying forward into the new millenni-

um is the realization that drilling does not lead to fluency (Van Patten, 1993). More importantly, complete mastery is not a precondition to moving along a given course syllabus. Items are acquired hierarchically and developmentally (that is, gradually and over time) (Rutheford, 1987).

### Sequencing of learning tasks

The type, nature and organization of learning tasks are at the core of any pedagogical proposition. The types of tasks currently advocated in the literature are those in which learners are actively involved in using the TL, and in learning through doing (Lee, 2000).

The notion of task implies active participation of the learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the TL. The work of researchers and materials designers such as D. Nunan and J. Lee suggest that learning tasks need to meet three criteria:

1. **Authenticity.** This relative term refers to use of samples of spoken or written language that have not been specifically written for the purposes of teaching language. Our language programs are called upon to provide learners with opportunities to experience—and use—the linguistic skills they will need outside the classroom (Nunan, 1999).
2. **Form/function transparency.** Ideal learning tasks are those that further learners' understanding of the relationship between form and function. The learning sequence begins with the processing of meaningful information (input). This processing of information is then followed by consciousness-raising activities aimed at making more concrete and explicit specific aspects of that input (which become the pedagogical focus of the lesson). All of these processes must not, of course, happen in a vacuum; they require very clear contexts where the purpose and intention of the interaction dictate the type of language to be used (Lee, 2000). The curricular implication of the previous assertion is that the point of departure for syllabus design must no longer be a structurally graded and overly exhaustive list of linguistic items. Today, syllabus design must begin with an inventory of target skills, leading to a formulation of what learners need to know and need to be able to do in order to perform those tasks.
3. **Task dependency.** Once the information has been processed, the learner must be engaged in a number of activities in which he/she is permitted to communicate meaningful information in progressively more open-ended con-

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texts (Lee, 2000). Although tasks serve concrete purposes ranging from reception to production and from manipulation to creation, they also need to function in an interconnected manner to form a coherent pedagogical unit (Harper, Lively & Williams, 1998). The goal of this thematic and structural organization is to facilitate the recombination of familiar items in new and original ways.

### Cultural awareness

Language instruction must be grounded in the culture of the target language community. The words of a given language have only the potential to convey meaning. True communication is the result of deciphering those linguistic symbols in view of the social context in which they were produced (Smith and Luce, 1979).

Cultural awareness is part of the humanistic vocation of language instruction. In addition to information about the TL community, FL instruction is called to help learners develop their understanding of the sense and functionality of culturally-determined behaviors (Seelye, 1993). As the National Standards document suggests, foreign language instruction today must target not only knowledge, but also understanding of the products, practices and perspectives of the cultures studied, to help learners restructure their attitudes and worldviews through observation, research, and reflection (NSFLEP, 1996).

### Strategy training

The previous model of language instruction presupposes a learner who is actively engaged in a number of self-directed language acquisition activities. However, the ability of learners to direct their own learning and the tools required to make that possible are not innate (Williams, Lively, and Harper, 1994). With this in mind, it is clear that our pedagogical paradigm for the new millennium needs to include the following notions:

1. **Self-directed learning.** Research findings suggest that second language acquisition differs from first language acquisition due in part to the cognitive differences between children and adults (Brundage & Macheracher, 1980; Ellis, 1994). I would like to suggest, as well, that adults' learning preferences introduce some important parameters to our new pedagogical paradigm.

Studies in adult learning indicate that adults work best when 1) they can exert control over their own learning, 2) their personal experience is used as a resource for further learning, and 3) they are involved in the development of learning objectives (Knowles, 1983). Our pedagogical paradigm needs to incorporate these parameters and allow learners to be involved in the setting of learning objectives and in the control of the pace and direction of specific language learning tasks.

**2. Emphasis on process.** The emerging paradigm calls for more than concerns about the evaluation of a given product, but rather for an emphasis on the steps (or processes) required to complete each given learning task (Flower and Hayes, 1981). Thus specification of sequences of production or of comprehension stages is at the core of this pedagogical model and implies a new orientation in terms of the roles of materials, learners, and teachers. The learner becomes the active component of the equation, focused on the exploration of relevant learning tasks with the active support of the materials and the teacher—both viewed as guiding resources.

**3. Development of learning and critical thinking skills.** Extensive research has been conducted in the past three decades on the characteristics of successful language learners (Rubin & Thompson, 1982; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Nunan, 1991). Those studies reveal that successful learners find their own way, organize information about language, make intelligent guesses, and use production and comprehension strategies to compensate for linguistic gaps.

Are these skills susceptible to teaching? The jury is still out on this subject, but existing evidence suggests that the overall effects of training are positive (particularly in the area of motivation). It also indicates that some strategies are more susceptible to instruction than others (with mediating factors such as prior knowledge, saliency and perceived relevance) (Nunan, 1999). The weaving of learning and critical thinking skills into our curriculum is justified and brings a more humanistic dimension to our language teaching praxis.

### Implications for assessment

Assessment (or the determination of the degree of success of its practices) is an essential component of any pedagogical model. Assessment is the preferred term here, since it is much broader and all encompassing than the concepts of eval-

uation and testing. However, the latter are viewed as interrelated and complementary aspects of the same process. In recent FL literature, two key points concerning assessment are conspicuous:

**1. Test the way we teach.** As our teaching practices evolve, so should our assessment and evaluation methods. If the new paradigm calls for a focus on process, authenticity of tasks and language, and personalized goals and objectives, then the mechanisms used for assessment should clearly reflect these parameters (Donato, Antonek and Tucker, 1996; Harper, Lively, and Williams, 1998).

**2. Incorporate self-assessment and alternative methods of assessment.** The new paradigm also calls for the incorporation of more self-assessment and alternative methods of evaluation to our assessment arsenal (Terry, 1998; Hammadou, 1998).

Since the goal of assessment is to determine what the student can do with the language, and the contexts for authentic language use are so diverse, teachers need to be creative and flexible. Portfolios, journals and special projects represent viable alternatives (or at the very least, supplements) to traditional objective and convergent achievement and proficiency measurements.

In the context of self-directed learning, it is also clear that learners need more opportunities to reflect upon and evaluate their own progress and achievement. However, honest and meaningful self-assessment does not happen spontaneously. Our FL courses must afford learners the training and experience required to examine effectively their own learning, ideally through regularly scheduled (and guided) self-assessment opportunities.

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### A word about new technologies

The way people access and process information has changed dramatically in the past two decades. Today, there are computers in more than 50 million American households (that is about a third of American homes in total), computer literacy is becoming part of the basic school curriculum, and access to the Internet is becoming easier, cheaper, and faster. In view of this changing hi-tech landscape, and taking into account the importance of authentic input, cultural awareness, affective variables and student-centeredness in the pedagogical model, technology is becoming an essential factor of the optimal FL teaching/learning equation.

As I have documented elsewhere (Cubillos, 1998), technology can offer language learners a number of advantages:

- It can facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary
- It has the potential to increase students' language awareness
- It can effectively support input-rich activities such as reading and writing
- It can also support and facilitate output activities
- It gives teachers an insight into their students' SLA processes
- It facilitates the exploration of the target language culture
- It enhance students' motivation
- It offers the added bonus of maximizing the use of teaching resources (making the teacher's job easier and more effective)

The current direction of FL education includes self-study and distance learning. Both are quite well supported (and increasingly so by new technologies). Electronic mail and conferencing, multimedia materials distributed via the Internet, speech-recognition software, and virtual reality are part of the arsenal available to increasing numbers of foreign language teachers and learners. New developments such as increased network bandwidth, faster network protocols, faster processor speeds, and multiprocessing promise to make technology even more responsive to our pedagogical needs.

### The role of teachers in the emerging paradigm

One of the greatest challenges for today's teachers is the clarification of their roles in the context of changing pedagogical

models (Phillips, 1998). This issue is particularly troublesome at this point in time, since technology has invaded what was considered "traditional teacher territory". Today, the question of what the role(s) of language professionals in the learning process should be is not only relevant, but also urgent.

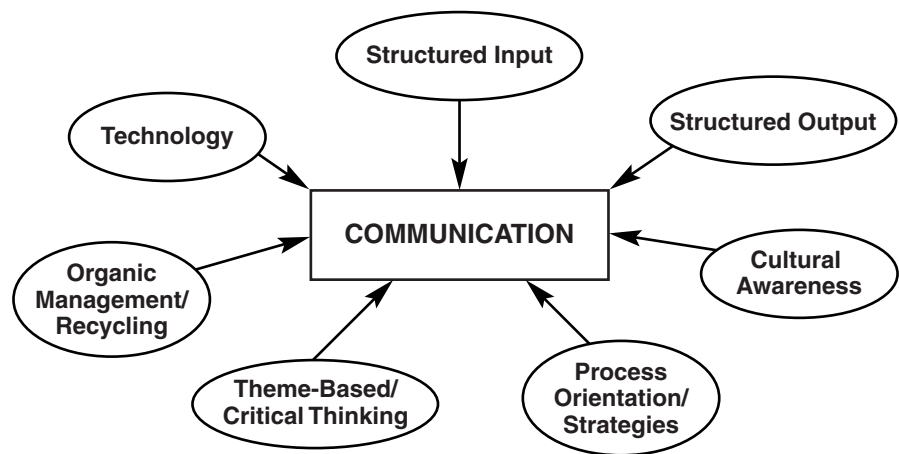
From my point of view, four key areas define the role of teachers in the new pedagogical paradigm:

1. Their ability to create bridges between learner needs and learning opportunities.
2. Their unique position to promote increased learner involvement in the learning process.
3. Their potential to facilitate diverse learning processes.
4. Their ability to evolve as a result of on-going research and professional training.

The literature suggests that teachers are called to play an important role in the planning and design of their language programs. Teachers need to be skilled in the gathering and organizing of relevant learner information (linguistic needs, socio-cultural background, cognitive styles and preferences, etc.), as well as in the ability to translate them into coherent curricula (MacDonald, 1991).

In addition to their "behind the scenes" role, teachers need to promote increased learner involvement in the learning process. Increased involvement does not mean handing over all responsibility and control to the learner. Rather, teachers need to determine the degree to which learners can and should be involved in the decision-making process at each stage (Nunan, 1999). Learners, with their teachers' help, need to be systematically sensitized to the processes underlying their own learning and be gradually encouraged to take greater and greater responsibility for it.

***"Research is growing at an exponential rate, and new technologies and teaching techniques continue to emerge. New teachers need training in the skills required to face the challenges of the new classrooms, while experienced teachers need opportunities to experiment and evaluate the new possibilities."***



**Chart 1**  
**The Emerging FL Teaching/Learning Paradigm**

Teachers also need to be aware of the learning principles at hand and be able to act as true facilitators of those learning processes. Teachers need to be skilled in the use of small group dynamics and in the principles behind collaborative learning. Only then will they become more effective and improve upon the student-grouping suggestions provided by their textbooks and other commercially developed learning materials (Ballman, 1998). Language professionals are called to be instructional leaders able to make informed choices from a wide and ever-expanding repertoire of approaches and techniques.

From the previous discussion it is clear that on-going professional development is a must for all FL teachers. Research is growing at an exponential rate, and new technologies and teaching techniques continue to emerge. New teachers need training in

the skills required to face the challenges of the new classrooms, while experienced teachers need opportunities to experiment and evaluate the new possibilities. Teacher training (such as participation in conferences, workshops, post-graduate courses, etc) must be considered a priority and included in all curricula.

**Conclusions and directions for future research**

Although the profession has grown and changed in the past 20 years, language instructors today face challenges no different from those of our predecessors: how to provide students with a satisfactory and effective language learning experience, how to help them develop an open and tolerant attitude towards those who are "different," and, finally, how to make the best of limited resources. Recent research findings can offer us a coherent

**Chart 2**  
**The Emerging FL Paradigm**

	<b>Indicators</b>
<b>Curriculum</b>	Structured around coherent thematic and conceptual units
	Rich in opportunities for meaningful interaction in the target language
	Aimed at the development of cultural awareness
	Allowing for self-directed learning
	Aimed at developing linguistic as well as learning and critical-thinking skills
<b>Instruction</b>	Functional contextualization of instruction
	Organic management of the learning process
	Consistent recycling of material
	Emphasis on process
	Teacher feedback rich in modeling and elaboration
	Taking advantage of new technologies
<b>Assessment</b>	Consistent with teaching approaches
	Incorporating alternative methods of assessment
	Promoting reflection and self-assessment

framework (or paradigm) to help us organize our pedagogical efforts and devise appropriate tools to address these age-old concerns. As summarized in Chart 1, the emerging Foreign Language Paradigm allows for a combination of factors both intrinsic and extrinsic to the classroom setting.

As we reflect on the academic developments of the past two decades, it is perhaps appropriate to evaluate our own praxis, and determine to what degree we need to adjust our teaching methods to derive the highest benefit from these research findings. Chart 2 stands as a reminder of some of these changes, and perhaps as a checklist to help us assess our own progress in the direction of combining research findings with our own language teaching experience.

In spite of the advancement that these principles presuppose, it is important to underscore that not all SLA questions have been answered. We continue to struggle with many issues such as:

1. The ideal task sequence: What sequence of learning tasks is the most beneficial to language acquisition? What is the impact of individual differences on the effectiveness of different learning sequences? How can teachers adjust their methods and materials to address those concerns?
2. The most effective use of classroom time in view of the potential of distance learning via the Internet and other interactive computer technologies: Now that we have technologies capable of supporting a great diversity of language learning tasks, what is the role of the FL classroom? How should classroom time be integrated with technology-mediated language learning?
3. The most adequate form(s) of assessment in the new teaching/learning environment: Given the new contexts for language learning and language use, what are the most relevant, valid, and reliable assessment options available to teachers? What kinds of rubrics are needed, and how can they be developed?

Perhaps this brief synthesis of SLA developments can be used as point of departure for debates concerning the evaluation and development of present day FL curricula. The important task for us language educators is to take effective steps to bridge the apparent gap between SLA research and classroom practice. As already noted, there is a lot of work to be done. However, only an honest and constructive dialogue between experience and research will truly advance the profession for the benefit of our students.

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