ENGLISH SYNTAX

Third Edition

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An Outline for Teachers of English Language Learners

By

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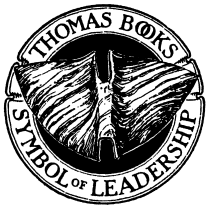

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PREFACE

It is remarkable that children learn all of the syntactic structures described in this book and with no instruction. Most children have mastered them by the time they start school. Indeed, their mastery is a fundamental readiness requirement for learning to read. However, learning a language is subject to critically sensitive age restraints. So, learning a second language becomes increasingly difficult as children age through this zone of sensitivity. Children who learn language within the sensitive readiness period have an implicit and intuitive knowledge of the language. They have no conscious awareness of the structural composition that they have mastered. The teacher, however, needs an explicit knowledge of the structures that they already understand and use. This explicit knowledge of the scope of the structures and of the sequence of their presentation is necessary for the successful teaching of older second language learners.

The purpose of this book is to provide teachers with a detailed explicit knowledge of the syntactic system and the order in which it is learned. I have tried to present the material as clearly and simply as I could, but, this is not the way it should be taught to the English language learner. This knowledge is for the teachers, so they can assist their students in acquiring a more natural implicit understanding. Real, meaningful experiences with real sentence structures, both of which are developmentally appropriate should be organized through the teachers' explicit knowledge for their students' implicit benefit.

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Chapter 1

SYNTAX IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

INTRODUCTION

Assuming some basic conditions are met, first language acquisition (L1A) is successfully completed with informal involvement with the ambient language. Most normal children will have acquired the syntax of their language by the time they start school.

There are, however, maturational effects that influence second language acquisition (L2A). The ultimate level of attainment of L2A depends to considerable extent on the age and stage of development when L2 learning begins (Birdsong, 1992). It is generally accepted that there is a critical or sensitive period for language learning (Lenneberg, 1967). It is also widely accepted that language acquisition is guided by an innate language acquisition procedure and is a near universal feat (Briscoe, 2000). Where failure occurs it appears to correlate more with genetic defects or with an almost complete lack of linguistic input during the critical period. This critical readiness period extends up to puberty. The general difficulty of acquiring a language after puberty is consistent with the critical readiness period notion. The window of opportunity for acquiring native language ability in a second language is determined by how much of the window is still open for the learner before the onset of puberty.

The critical readiness period's being open does not insure the acquisition of a second language or even a first. There needs to be a sufficiently rich language ambience for acquisition. Consider the meager linguistic abilities that could be acquired by a child isolated until puberty in a small room and who had not been spoken to by her parents since infancy (Curtiss, Fromkin, Krashen, Rigler, and Rigler,

1974). Post-puberty language acquisition is greatly different than language acquisition pre-puberty. Consider the general failure of native speakers of one language to acquire another language as adults.

There are some exceptional learners who appear to retain the linguistic sensitivity of childhood throughout their lives. These individuals are able to attain near-native language ability in their additional language(s). However, this sensitivity is not retained in most humans. The pedagogical approach to language teaching post-adolescent students requires a systematic approach that follows the scope and sequence of the acquisition of English as it is normally accomplished in childhood. The organization that was completed by the ready mind's acquisition device must be managed now by a well-organized language learning curriculum if it is to be successful with older students.

THE DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGE

Language has three basic constituents. It has a lexicon, the vocabulary; it has syntax, the orderly positioning of words relative to each other; and it has a figurative system, the processes for producing nonliteral and idiomatic structures. In regard to communication, language has two dimensions. These are comprehension and production, and their modes of communication are varied. The common production modes are speaking and writing. The common comprehension modes are listening and reading. Language comprehension can be likened to following a verbal map. Language production can be likened to producing a verbal map for someone else to follow.

THE COMPREHENSION/PRODUCTION DISTINCTION

The development of language comprehension precedes and exceeds production ability (Lenneberg, 1967; McNeill, 1966; Brown, 1973). Not only does comprehension precede it, there is a distinct difference in the form production skills take as they emerge. Comprehension skill at each developmental step must be considered first. (Appendix A contains a chart that plots the sequence in which the comprehension of English syntactic structures develops.) The readi-

ness base for production development is comprehension. Production skills will only emerge as growth occurs in comprehension. However, comprehension is a necessary, but insufficient base for developing production skill in many language learners. The scope and sequence of the development of production skills needs direct consideration itself.

Different areas of the brain are more particular to comprehension and to production. Broca's area is more for production of language and Wernicke's area for comprehension. Nerve fibers connecting the two areas permit necessary communication of language functions. Injuries to either area or to the communicating neural pathways cause corresponding communication disabilities. Whether in the case of language rehabilitation as in the case of brain injury, or in the case of second language learning; the comprehension/production distinction is important to make. Language instruction must be mode specific.

THE SCOPE AND SEQUENCE OF SYNTAX ACQUISITION

There is a set of syntactic structures that is common to all native English language users; at a more abstract level all natural languages share common syntactic features that are acquired by normal humans. The sequence of acquisition follows a developmental pattern from the simple to the complex. It corresponds to the development of preoperational cognitive structures and can be said to be a verbal map of them, (Hargis, Mercaldo, and Johnson, 1975). This developmental sequence is the same for all, even though the rate of acquisition is normally quite varied (Palermo and Molfese, 1972; Carrow-Woolfolk and Lynch, 1982; Bloom, 1978; Brown, 1973). It is this developmental sequence that should be followed in second language programming.

Language programming has two primary constituents. The first of these is assessment; the second is instruction. Assessment should be referenced to the scope and sequence of syntactic development. (Appendix A contains a chart and glossary for the scope and sequence of the comprehension development of the syntactic structures of English.) Assessment of these structures is used to find a developmentally appropriate starting point from which to launch instructional activities. Finding this point also provides threshold information.

Identifying this threshold permits communication. Communication is established if the language used is within this threshold of comprehended structures. The threshold provides a starting place for comfortable and successful instruction. Instruction that occurs too much above the developmental threshold is frustrating and unproductive.

Syntax cannot be programmed as a set of empty frames devoid of vocabulary. Syntax can only be learned with concrete expression and referents. This means a concrete and utilitarian vocabulary must fill out the sentence frames. Some vocabulary occurs as a function of specific syntactic structures, and it will be presented as needed in syntactic development. The words that serve these functions are sometimes called structure words or function words. They are the words with the highest frequency of use. The other words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) are sometimes called form words. These words should be for the most part the highest frequency or most utilitarian. I have included a word list comprised of both structure and form words in Appendix B. Mastery of the syntactic structures listed in Appendix A and the mastery of these high frequency words will be sufficient for a third -grade reading level.

Mastery of the syntactic structures of English is necessary for vocabulary growth to occur beyond the most rudimentary levels. With their mastery, literacy can be achieved and engagement with literature is where most growth in vocabulary occurs.

I must point out here that my emphasis is on the comprehension mastery of syntactic structures and basic vocabulary. Production skills need specific teaching and are on a different developmental schedule. However, language production is still dependent on comprehension mastery at each stage of development.

SOME ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

The most essential feature of language instruction is that the student must be successful at each step along the way. Each step should be of an appropriate level of difficulty so that the student can do it correctly. Success is the most powerful reinforcer available to a teacher or a clinician. It makes accessible the next most powerful reinforcer–task completion. Success and task completion are the most important char-