Chapter 9

Opportunities for Engaging Young English Language Learners Through Technology Use

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ABSTRACT

There are still many aspects of language learning that are not well explained, but second language acquisition theories provide evidence for under what conditions language is learned. Key among these conditions is the opportunities that students have for input, output, social interaction, and feedback. Teachers have control over the types of opportunities that language learners have in their classrooms, and it is important that these opportunities are engaging so that learners take advantage of them and therefore learn. Technology, used to support engaging language tasks, can help this to happen. This chapter addresses the links between second language acquisition theory and engaging opportunities for young learners in language classrooms, and it explores uses of technology that can support both.

INTRODUCTION

Although findings from brain research and other lines of second language acquisition (SLA) study are constantly adding to our understandings of language learning, we actually know relatively little about how the brain learns and processes language (Genesee, 2000; Sousa, 2011). We do know, however, under what conditions language is learned; therefore, from a pedagogical standpoint, Spolsky’s (1989) model of conditions for language learning is one of the most useful for classroom teachers. Spolsky notes that English language learner (ELL) outcomes are a result of the knowledge which with learners come to class, their innate abilities, their general motivation for studying English, plus the opportunities that...
learners have that support language learning. Teachers cannot affect learners’ previous knowledge or abilities, and they may not have a role in learner’s motivations, but they do have control over the types of language learning opportunities that learners have in their classrooms. However, if the role of teachers is not only to provide the opportunities noted in the SLA literature but to make sure that students learn by taking the opportunities offered, we need to look closely at what kinds of opportunities are most linked to student achievement. This chapter addresses the links between SLA theory and engaging opportunities for young learners in language classrooms, and it explores uses of technology that can support both. Because technology should be used in the service of other goals such as developing engaging tasks and meeting learning objectives, this chapter first describes how engaging tasks can be created and then suggests how technology might support them.

BACKGROUND

Instructed Second Language Acquisition

There are many theories of and research on the kinds of opportunities that all learners need in order to acquire English. Common elements that can be elicited from the literature include comprehensible input, output, noticing, social interaction, and feedback (Ellis, 2008). These elements are described briefly below.

Comprehensible Input

Language learners need an undetermined amount of comprehensible input (Krashen, 2004). What we know is that it should be a lot, or, as Ellis [2008] notes, “extensive, and that it is generally effective for learning when it is just above the learner’s current level of understanding. Input that is interesting and meaningful is more likely to become actual language intake and be processed by the learner than input that is uninteresting and unconnected to students’ lives.

Output

Although many educators still focus on comprehensible input as the most important element of language acquisition (e.g., Krashen, 2004), the SLA research is clear that opportunities for meaningful output are just as important (see Ellis, 2008, for a list of contributions that output can make to language acquisition). The focus here is on the term meaningful; the research shows that activities such as uncontextualized grammar drills and error correction are often not worth the time spent (Folse, 2016; Reber, 2011; Ur, 2016).

Noticing

Noticing indicates a focus on language forms and their related functions and meanings. Studies show that meaningful output can help learners notice the forms they are using and thereby support language fluency and accuracy (Leow & Donatelli, 2017; Schmidt, 1990). However, too much focus on form, or a focus on form that is not meaningfully integrated into the tasks at hand, makes it difficult for children to use the forms. For young children, focusing explicitly and consistently on grammar drill and practice may actually work against their natural learning tendencies (Pinter, 2017).