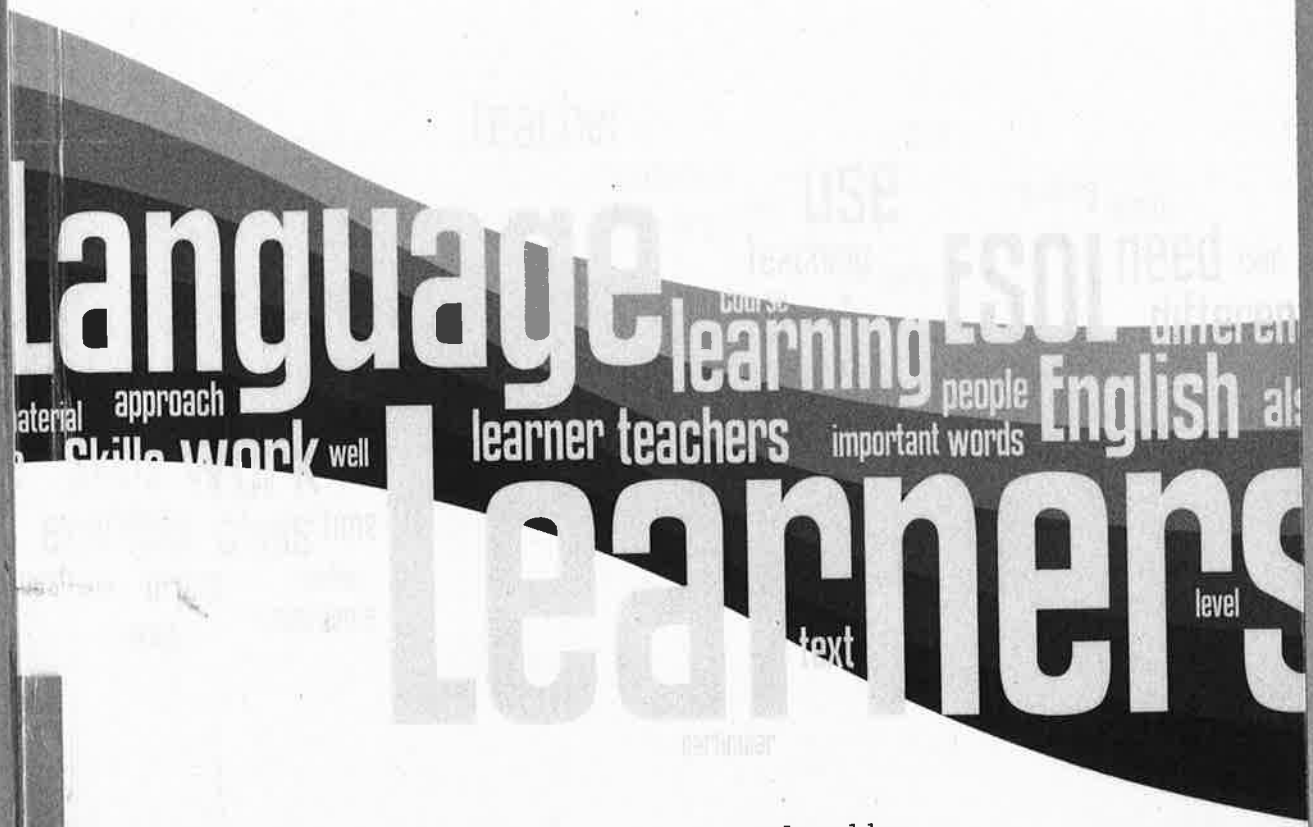
DEVELOPING ADULT SKILLS

SERIES EDITORS: DAVID MALLOWS AND WENDY MOSS

Teaching Adult ESOL

Principles and Practice



Edited by
Anne Paton & Meryl Wilkins

- Select content that will be useful and interesting.
- Take care never to marginalize a learner or a minority group of learners when selecting content.
- Pay attention to background knowledge needed (e.g. if teaching how to buy a train ticket, learners need to know that prices vary according to the time of travel).
- Emulate real-life language use. Be aware of differences between spoken and written language, and provide realistic examples.
- Emulate the realities of communication outside the classroom (e.g. making an official phonecall is rarely straightforward, so it should not be portrayed this way in classroom practice).
- Emulate the resources encountered outside class, by using authentic material as much as possible.
- Emulate real-life tasks in the classroom (e.g. by organizing project work).
- Consult learners as much as is feasible about lesson content, and invite their evaluations.

Notes

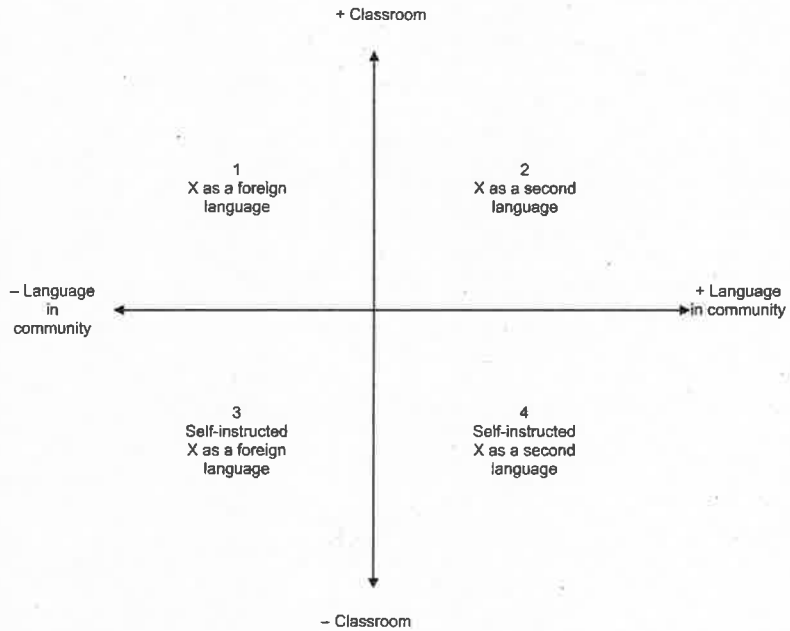
1 CfBT 2005 available at: www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/learning_material/reports/tranche41_batch3.doc
2 www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/embeddedlearning/
3 Use of teaching resources is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.

4 Second language acquisition (SLA) and the contexts of UK ESOL practice

John Sutter

Having considered the contexts in which ESOL learners live and learn, we will now go on to look at how these contexts interact with current theories of language acquisition and consider the implications for ESOL teaching and learning.

Before we do this, let's briefly revisit the idea of a 'context' of language learning, in particular the notions of ESOL versus EFL contexts – where typically, a crucial difference is seen to be the presence or absence of a 'host community' of target-language speakers. Block (2003) provides a quadrant diagram to illustrate the contexts generally recognized and considered by SLA theorists and researchers (see Figure 4.1):



Source: Block 2003.

Figure 4.1 A quadrant diagram of recognized SLA contexts

TASK 4.1

Think about your own language learning experiences, and try marking them onto the quadrant in the appropriate place: do they fit neatly into the individual quadrants?

As we saw in Chapter 1, a crude division between ESOL and EFL is an oversimplification – as soon as we look at real so-called 'foreign-' or 'second-' language learners we find that there can often be as many similarities between them as there are differences. For instance, although ESOL learners are by definition living in the 'target-language community', they may have little – or even no – opportunity to use the language they are trying to learn outside of the classroom: 'We wake up in the morning and we don't know where to go, sometimes we spend the whole day at home' (learner cited in Roberts et al. 2004: 30). And when there are opportunities to use the new language, these are often not the most conducive to language learning: Barton and Pitt (2003) cite research by Perdue that found that:

> adult immigrants typically have to use the target language in environments which promote anxiety and marginalisation rather than opportunities for language learning ... most of their everyday use of the additional language is within asymmetrical interaction (such as when they are clients, customers and interviewees).
>
> (Barton and Pitt 2003: 11)

Just as these contextual categories – *EFL* versus *ESOL; classroom learning* versus *naturalistic acquisition in the community* – appear inadequate to account for the diverse real-life contexts and experiences of many language learners, so too do the keynote terms of SLA theory: 'second', 'language' and 'acquisition' (Block 2003). In fact there is great tension between this terminology and the social contexts and sociolinguistic realities of UK ESOL learners; for this reason, we will first briefly examine the problematic nature of SLA terminology.

Bilingualism/multilingualism – second language?

Block (2003) points out that it is highly inaccurate to talk about English as a 'second' language for many learners: a great number will be bilingual or multilingual before they begin learning English. For many, this will have been from birth, and such learners may have a problem identifying their so-called 'first' language. Yet SLA assumes that language users should have a 'first' language, and places a high value on 'native speaker' status: it therefore has some difficulty accounting for the experiences of language users who are from a multilingual background (and it should be pointed out that such learners are in the majority).This, according to some theorists, indicates a *monolingual bias* in SLA; in other words, SLA is a field of study with a profoundly monolingual worldview. As Kathy Pitt puts it,

> There is an unexplored assumption in much of SLA research that a learner has acquired one language from birth and, now that she is living in another country with a different language, she will gradually acquire this additional language and assimilate to 'native-speaker' norms. The two languages are seen as separate and stable entities.
>
> (Pitt 2005: 67)

Indeed, Harris (1997) coined the term 'romantic bilingualism' to describe the process by which language users who are actually multilingual, and who may find it difficult to say which language is truly their 'first' language, come to be *essentialized* as speakers of language X or Y, having particular *allegiance to* or *expertise in* that language despite the fact that their knowledge of their so-called 'first language' may in fact be quite limited. This, of course, makes such speakers easier to categorize within a monolingual worldview – such learners are 'romantically' reclassified simply as 'bilinguals', but is also highly inaccurate.

This is more than an academic debate. There is some research to indicate that *third* language acquisition, may be a rather different process to *second* language acquisition. It may thus be important to find out whether learners are already bi- or multilingual. In particular, learners who already speak two or more languages are less likely to have monolingual perspectives on social aspects of language learning – they are likely to be swifter to notice and accept cultural differences and mores. And as they are likely to already have a broader range of cultural and linguistic repertoires than monolingual speakers, they are less likely to feel threatened by different interaction patterns, politeness routines and all the other 'culture-bound' features of a language.

Many UK ESOL learners may be using several languages in their daily lives. In her study of Panjabis in Southall, Saxena (1994) gives the example of a family whose members use English, Hindi, Panjabi/Gurmukhi, Panjabi-Hindi, Hindi/Devanagari according to function and context. Such learners may thus be using English only in a narrow range of functions: the question is whether they wish to improve their English only for a particular narrow range of functions (with obvious implications for the syllabus) or whether they have aspirations towards using English in a broader set of contexts (and if so, which ones). The point being that ESOL teachers have to cater for learners who are truly *multilingual*, and who wish to maintain their uses of their other languages, and who consequently may not see English as ever being their sole, or even main, language of daily communication.

Language varieties – second language or languages?

Just as there has been a tendency to essentialize speakers of other languages, we might argue that 'English' speakers are often similarly essentialized as speakers of a particular variety of English – 'Scottish', 'Estuary', 'Mockney', 'Black' or 'Standard' English, for example.

In fact, we all have a repertoire of varieties – and these are not clear-cut, but shade into each other in our day-to-day lives. ESOL learners, in particular, will very likely meet many varieties of English in their daily lives, in addition to the 'standard' English they probably find in most teaching materials, especially in the highly multicultural settings of many big cities and towns. They will certainly encounter vexations should they try to define 'English' or identify what exactly *is* the language they are trying to learn!

It is quite probable that many UK ESOL learners will use English, albeit to perhaps quite a limited degree:

- At work.
- In local shops.
- With neighbours.
- To deal with institutions.
- To watch television.
- To read a variety of types of text.

They will therefore, as we have noted above in relation to *varieties*, be exposed to many *styles* or *registers* of English, though they may not be especially sensitized to any differences between them (in terms of, pronunciation, lexis, grammar, level of formality, perceived status, and so on). They will almost certainly need eventually to have a repertoire of such styles rather than just one.

Acquisition and learning

One persistent legacy of Krashen's (1978: 153) work on SLA has been the acquisition/learning dichotomy: 'Language acquisition is a subconscious process. Language learning, on the other hand is a conscious process, and is the result of either a formal language learning situation, or a self-study program.' As Block (2003: 94) observes, it is a distinction that is popular with language teachers, as it: 'resonates with their day-to-day experience of ineffective classroom language teaching'. It appears to correlate with the classroom contexts in Figure 4.1 above: learners *learn* in the classroom, and *acquire* in naturalistic contexts. However, a moment's thought shows that this is not the case: learners clearly will process language consciously and unconsciously in both contexts. In a naturalistic context they may consult dictionaries and reflect on the form of language they have encountered; in the classroom they may be inattentive to form-focused teaching, or simply engage in 'normal' conversation with a teacher or classmate.

Krashen maintained that the two systems – acquisition and learning – were entirely separate; this is called the *non-interface* position. Learning, therefore, would not lead to acquisition. This, of course, would explain the 'ineffective classroom language teaching' referred to in the quote from Block above. However, although this position is largely discredited now, there remain competing accounts of how conscious attention to language, or conscious processing, eventually result in unconscious processing and use, and we will examine some of these accounts below. The

question Block (2003) raises though, is whether second language acquisition is simply a matter of *processing* or whether wider social factors also play a role. This again, as we shall see below, is of particular relevance to the contexts of ESOL learning.

Applying SLA theory to ESOL

SLA as a field of study is currently in a state of considerable flux. At the end of their review of current theories in SLA, Mitchell and Myles (2004: 257) state: 'we are left with a reinforced impression of great diversity ... We find that new theoretical perspectives (such as connectionism or socio-cultural theory) have entered the field, without displacing the established ones (such as universal grammar)'.

However, in spite of this great diversity, it is possible to group many of these theories according to their general approach. In many ways, the current situation in SLA mirrors a divide in linguistics generally, which can perhaps best be described as the competing claims of *internal* and *external* factors. In general, linguistics *internal* factors refer to a Chomskyan interest in the *mind* of language users, *universal grammars*, and *competence* or knowledge about the structures of language. *External* factors refer to a Hallidayan focus on the *contexts* of language use, the *social factors* involved and *performance* or actual real-life instances of language use. In SLA, an interest in the *internal* has produced theories driven by psycholinguistic or cognitive factors and linguistic structures. More recently there has been an increasing interest in the *external*. This is behind calls for a 'social turn' in SLA: the idea that the examination of social contexts and social factors can cast light on how languages are learnt. For a more detailed examination of social and individual factors in SLA, good follow-up reading would be of the book referred to above – David Block's (2003) *The Social Turn in Second Language Acquisition*.

Internal and external factors, or theories based on either of these, are not, however, necessarily opposed. Indeed, they could be seen as complementing each other, and many researchers are now looking at possible ways of synthesizing these two perspectives. Further, there are claims that the categories 'internal' and 'external' are a false dichotomy: minds are not purely internal phenomena, and so-called 'social factors' are not outside individuals. These factors only come to have meaning in relation to the minds of individuals or groups of individuals (Rogoff 1990, 1995).

However, leaving this aside for the moment, the claim often made by researchers interested in the external is that the *social* has often been overlooked in favour of the *individual*, and this omission creates, at best, a partial account of language, language use and language acquisition, and at worst, an account that is deeply warped. We have already highlighted the special importance of the social contexts that ESOL learning takes place in; a good understanding of these external and social factors in relation to language learning or acquisition is thus of particular significance to the practice of ESOL teachers.

Given the multiplicity of SLA theories alluded to above, we will not attempt here to outline individual theories in any detail (for a good overview, see Mitchell and Myles 2004). Rather, we will examine *concepts* from SLA that have particular significance for the contexts of ESOL learners, and examine what the implications might be for classroom practice.

Acculturation – Schumann, Alberto and identity

One of the earliest attempts to recognize the importance of social factors to SLA theory was Schumann's (1978) study of a single learner, Alberto – a Costa Rican immigrant to the US. Alberto was not a particularly successful language learner, which Schumann attributes to two key groups of factors: *social* and *psychological distance*. Alberto's membership of a low-status, low-income group (Spanish-speaking immigrants) who are relatively isolated from the host community gave him social distance from speakers of the target language. His low motivation to integrate with the host community, and the stress and anxiety of his daily life separated him *psychologically*. Schumann called this the *acculturation model*.

Whilst the significance of Schumann's inclusion of social factors in a model of SLA is now universally acknowledged, Norton (1995) points out that the model 'essentializes' concepts such as community, motivation, group identity (echoing Harris's point about the 'essentialization' of language allegiance and expertise, above), and fails to recognize the social complexities of learning contexts such as Alberto's. Rather than being recognized as a unique and complex individual, Alberto is firmly classified as a 'Costa Rican' or 'Latino' trying to become 'American'. It is blandly assumed that Alberto identifies himself fully and completely with a distinct and definable 'community' of other Costa Ricans or 'Latinos'. In fact Alberto may see himself rather differently (perhaps as a Costa Rican *émigré*, or even a 'citizen of the world'), and the Costa Rican 'community' may well be a more diverse, less definable and less unified than the terminology suggests. Mixed marriages and partnerships, geographical spread, internal distinctions of class and allegiance will all have a bearing on this.

Factors such as membership of low-status and low-income groups, or high levels of stress and anxiety in daily life are certainly features of many present-day ESOL learners' experience, but in Schumann's model the onus on doing the 'acculturating' seems nonetheless to be firmly on Alberto. Schumann's conclusion also seems to imply that Alberto is unwilling to learn, and that he is almost too comfortable in his Spanish-speaking community. In fact, as we have seen earlier, and as is borne out by research such as that of Bremer et al. (1996), immigrant second-language learners may have very little opportunity to use the new language in anything other than official or gate-keeping encounters (such as dealing with government agencies or visits to the doctor – encounters which might determine access to goods or services, often characterized by unequal power relations between participants), and will therefore find it extremely difficult to enter into social relations, or negotiate their position with regard to social or psychological distance from the 'host community'. The NRDC's case studies of ESOL provision do indeed cite the strong motivation of many ESOL learners to learn English in order to integrate and develop more independence in their lives. But motivation is not simply a *personal* characteristic of this or that

learner – it is highly context dependent; having to do a disproportionate amount of work for limited rewards will eventually undermine the most motivated learner.

Social practices

Learning an additional language is not just a matter of learning linguistic content in the form of grammar, lexis and phonology. It's also about learning, and participating in, the social practices that *contextualize* the language. Two examples might be *leave-taking* and *talking to strangers*. Leave-taking, at the end of an informal conversation, or a telephone call, is not simply a matter of saying 'Goodbye': there are particular routines and features – both physical and linguistic – that characterize it in English. Final 'goodbyes' are usually preceded by phrases such as '... anyway' '... OK ... well ...' that indicate the conversation is to be drawn to a close. Sometimes the intention to end the conversation is stated more clearly – though still euphemistically – with phrases such as '... I'd better let you go/get on'. These will probably, in the case of a face-to-face conversation, be accompanied by a small step or two away from the other participant(s), or small physical movements indicating imminent departure (e.g. picking up a bag).

Different cultures will have different practices in talking to strangers, which constrain the type of situation or context in which strangers might typically strike up conversations. In Britain, one context where it does seem legitimate to 'talk to a stranger' is at a children's playgroup. However, there are still certain conventions appearing to govern this, for instance:

- Such 'stranger talk' will normally be adult-to-adult.
- Where it is adult-to-child, it will normally have been initiated by the child.
- Adult-to-adult interactions will often commence with a comment or question about their children or the children at the playgroup.

Language, behaviours, and context are thus very tightly bound. Context shapes the types of behaviour and language that will occur, and much of this appears to be a matter of 'convention' – convention being one aspect of 'social practices'.

Wenger uses the metaphor of a river and a mountain to describe this. Does the river carve its way through and down the mountain, or does the mountain shape and mould the river and its course? Well – both: the river and the mountain shape and constrain each other. So it is with the relationship between the individual and society, or between language and context. For the ESOL learner, then, part of the job of learning language is to learn the 'contours' of the landscape – and these 'contours' are really what is meant by 'social practices'.

TASK 4.2

What are the elements of the social practice of job interviews that ESOL learners

COMMENT 4.2

Preparation for a job interview would involve more than the study of typical interaction patterns and language functions and forms that occur in these, it would also involve looking at other elements of the context such as the typical physical positioning of participants, body postures, dress codes, levels of formality, turn-taking, the importance of giving detailed answers and of 'selling' oneself to the interview panel. Like the linguistic elements, these too may differ from culture to culture; indeed they are often the very things that most puzzle and fascinate people who have moved into a new society.

So a 'practices' view of social interaction and language is one that does not attribute fixed meanings to decontextualized interaction – it regards all meaning making as highly context-bound, and 'meaning' itself as something to be socially negotiated. 'Making meaning', therefore, is a *communal* rather than individual activity in which the participants' various expectations, linguistic resources, individual histories and social backgrounds will have great bearing upon the outcome. And for ESOL learners, one key site of this communal meaning making will be the ESOL classroom itself. The 'class' therefore, is more than just the collection of individuals in it, it is a primary contextual feature of the meaning-making process.

Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) has been applied to many fields and holds special relevance to ESOL. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) define communities of practice as:

> An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relationships – in short practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour. As a social construct, a community of practice is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages.

Becoming a member of particular communities of practice is therefore a key element of learning – essentially it is a 'licence to participate' in a particular endeavour.

TASK 4.3

What 'communities of practice' do you belong to? What 'communities of practice' do you think your ESOL learners might belong to, or aspire to belong to?

Clearly, the ESOL class itself may be one of the most important communities of practice to which a learner may feel they belong. Indeed, in many cases, it may be the only one in which they can use English, or even the only group of any sort that they have access to:

> For many learners the classroom is their main reference group, sometimes the most motivating aspect of their lives – what helps them to get up in the morning.
>
> (Roberts et al. 2004: 14)

> We wake up I the morning and we don't know where to go, sometimes we spend the whole day at home
>
> (Learner cited in Roberts et al. 2004: 30)

It is therefore worth analysing what exactly this community of practice is, and what is involved in belonging to it. The quote from Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) above talked about 'ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relationships' – these undoubtedly exist in ESOL classrooms.

TASK 4.4

What 'ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values and power relationships' can you identify as being a part of ESOL classroom practices? Where might difficulties lie for ESOL learners?

COMMENT 4.4

> In a language class, the classroom group together not only freshly evolves the new language (the content of lessons), but also together jointly constructs the lessons (the social procedures of teaching and learning)
>
> (Breen 2001: 132)

> ESOL classes are 'not only a vital learning environment but also an important social space which is enriched by the resources and life experience, informal support systems and desire to learn that ... learners and their teacher bring to it
>
> (Roberts et al 2004: 31)

1 *Ways of doing things*: ESOL methodology could be highlighted here: pairwork, groupwork, 'even' participation, are typically features of classroom life that learners encounter and to which they will have greater or lesser difficulty adapting. Some learners may find it difficult

to adjust to some classroom methods because of personality factors (they may be shy) or learning style factors (they may favour lots of auditory input over writing; and find using a textbook quite difficult), or because of their past educational experiences. Some learners (and teachers) will have experienced classrooms as places where teachers talk and learners listen and write; they may consequently find pairwork very challenging indeed). Some learners may not have experienced classrooms at all.

2 *Ways of talking*: Again, ESOL classrooms typically involve a lot of cooperative talking; and 'talk is work' here too (Roberts et al. 2004). Levels of formality may present challenges (for instance, does the teacher nominate learners to speak or do they 'self-select'? Do learners raise hands if they wish to speak? How are learners expected to speak to each other? Is L1 permitted?).

3 *Beliefs and values*: This is potentially one of the most difficult areas. ESOL learners tend to come from a great diversity of backgrounds – many may find this diversity difficult in itself. It is common to have learners from countries nominally in conflict sharing the same class. In addition, many of the 'values' of an ESOL class are currently 'imposed' in some sense: the 'liberal' values of the West, which manifest themselves in the classroom in the form of equal opportunities, for example, or concepts like 'tolerance', are enshrined in legislation and the general practices of educational institutions. These values may conflict with learners' own belief systems. Teachers have a very difficult job here to negotiate some sort of shared classroom values.

4 *Power relationships*: This is another potentially difficult area. Learners may expect particular power relationships between themselves and the teacher. They may for instance expect every mistake they make to be corrected, and to be explicitly told how to perform every single task they undertake. Learners may challenge power relationships that do not seem appropriate to them; ESOL teachers often find it difficult to devolve responsibility to learners, who may wish for a greater level of direction than current language-teaching ideologies, such as 'learner-centredness', or 'self-correction', promote. Learners may find the teacher's ethnicity or gender problematic; they may not be used to what they perceive as being in a subordinate position to a woman, or they may regard a non-white teacher as not being a speaker of 'real' English.

Equally, power relationships between learners may be problematic – issues of ethnicity and gender may again come to the fore here. Losey's (1995) study showed how Mexican-American males participated in an adult literacy class on an equal basis with Anglo-American males: however, though they comprised nearly half the class, Mexican-American females hardly participated at all. Losey concludes that they were effectively powerless – positioned as a 'double minority' in terms of both ethnicity and gender.

The transformation of a diverse group of individuals into a community who 'come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour' – in this case language learning – is clearly not an overnight affair, but a more drawn-out process that can take more or less time according to context and the individuals involved. It does seem though, that learners feel that they have an important stake in what 'ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relationships' eventually come to exist in their classes, so explicit discussion of these may help: for instance, Montse, a Spanish learner of English cited by Block (2003), complains about the irregular attendance patterns of her classmates – she feels this has slowed down the development of a 'real' class that would learn faster and more effectively: 'I'd rather have a lesson with five people maximum, but always the same ... the thing is is that if it is a group of nine, ideally everyone should be there. I don't know why but the people seem more disconnected ...' (Montse, quoted in Block 2003: 111).

It is important for ESOL teachers to try to discover what communities of practice their learner encounter, belong to or aspire to belonging to. Teachers will also have to be aware of what kind of language and what kind of practices occur in such communities; this will in turn highlight language areas that would benefit from classroom work:

> Understanding good language learning requires attention to social practices in the contexts in which individuals learn L2s. As well, we have argued for the importance of examining the ways in which learners exercise their agency in forming and reforming their identities in those contexts. We see this dual focus as necessary to understand good language learning.
>
> (Norton and Toohey 2001: 318)

'Input' – the raw 'stuff' of language learning

Stephen Krashen (1976) famously proposed that 'input' of the target language was a *necessary condition* for language learning, though not the only one. It seems to be a matter of commonsense that you won't learn a language unless you are exposed to it in some way, whether by hearing it spoken or by reading it. Although Krashen's theories have now been generally rejected or superseded, 'input' remains a widely used concept in SLA. He is today, according to Block (2003: 94), 'more respected for putting input on the research agenda in SLA than he is for providing a workable theory of SLA'. 'Input' is also an important part of what has come to be known as the *Input–Interaction–Output* (IIO) model of SLA. There are several different versions of this, but it is perhaps the single most 'mainstream' framework for accounts of SLA (Block 2003).

It is therefore pertinent to ask what 'input' do ESOL learners receive – what

TASK 4.5

Make a list of all the different sources of English your ESOL learners might be exposed to during the course of a single day.

COMMENT 4.5

Unlike learners in a 'foreign-' language learning setting, ESOL learners will probably encounter the language they are trying to learn throughout their daily life. Even very low-level learners might:

- Listen to radio/TV.
- Receive a variety of texts in English in the post (e.g. junk mail, official letters, bills).
- Look at magazines or newspapers.
- Overhear conversations in shops, at bus stops.
- Engage in transactions in English in various settings.
- Browse the Internet.
- Read billboards and other advertisements.
- Talk to their classmates before and after class.
- Listen to their children using English.
- Speak to neighbours.

They will consequently be exposed to far more English than just that which they encounter during their language class. In addition, learners who are beyond beginner level will very likely be engaging in conversations in English; both *transactional* – where the primary communicative objective is to get something done (e.g. in shops) – and *interractional* – where the primary communicative objective is to maintain social relationships (e.g. informal conversation with neighbours). This will expose them to many varieties of English (e.g. local dialects, 'non-native' English), some of which are discussed below.

Obviously, learners will be able to make more sense of some chunks of this input than others, and it is the input that is in some sense 'comprehensible' which is of most use to learners. This doesn't mean that they have to make sense of *all* of it, or understand it completely – but they have to be able to somehow work on this input to make meaning, or to use it as a basis for learning (for example, by noticing grammatical or lexical or phonological elements of it). Input, on this account, needs to be comprehensible to be of value: so, two immediate implications for classroom practice are that:

1 Teachers can help learners make sense of texts which they might encounter in their daily lives, and which might be useful to them, by selecting such texts for analysis and use in the classroom – or by asking learners to bring in examples of such texts (spoken or written).
2 Teachers can set learning tasks which help learners to 'notice' key elements of such texts – which in effect helps turn 'raw' input into comprehensible input. Thus, for ESOL learners, it is generally better to set *tasks* graded to the learners' level than to grade (or oversimplify) the *text* itself. (For instance, with lower level learners, gas bills – which are quite complex texts – might be used with tasks set to identify key numbers; most of the other language in the text could be ignored).

TASK 4.6

Look at the excerpt below from the Jamaican folksong, *Evenin' Time*. What grammatical, phonological and lexical features of Jamaican English might you notice?

Come Miss Claire
Tek de bankra off yu head mi dear,
Evening breeze a blow,
Come dis way Miss Flo.

Evenin' time,
Work is over now is evenin' time,
Wih deh walk pon mountain,
Deh walk pan mountain,
Deh walk pan mountain side.

Meck we cook wih bickle pan dih way,
Meck wih eat an sing,
Dance an play ring ding
Pan dih mountain side.

(taken from www.jamaicans.com)

COMMENT 4.6

You might have noticed the following:

1 Grammar:
   - 'a blow' similar to 'is blowing'.
   - 'a' marks 'presentness'.
   - 'yu' = possessive 'your'.
2 Phonology:
   - 'th' sound becomes /d/.

- Some final consonants dropped ('evenin' 'an').

3 Lexis:

- spelling is not always consistent (e.g. 'pon/pan', 'we/wih') perhaps a result of trying to accurately represent phonological differences.
- We can deduce that 'bankra' and 'bickle' are nouns, without knowing meaning (a 'bankra' is a 'big basket', 'bickle' means 'food').

Of course, 'noticing' features of Jamican English, which has great similarities to British English, is a rather different proposition to ESOL learners' ability to notice features of English when their first language is a very different one: but the 'decoding' element is the same – letting your attention be drawn to particular features, spotting patterns and making connections.

Affordance

Language learning is highly unpredictable. A common observation of ESOL teachers is that in any given lesson, what the teacher is teaching and what the learners are learning is rarely the same thing. Learners may come away from a lesson that was ostensibly all about the present perfect tense with little new understanding about it, or ability to use it, but instead with several new items of vocabulary or improved reading skills. Unsurpringly then, the term 'input' has been critiqued (by van Lier 2000, among others), as being based on a mechanistic and computational metaphor for the mind, and thus being too linear to account for the complexities of language, language learning and the mind itself. Van Lier (2000), proposes instead the term 'affordances', in other words opportunities for learners to engage with language. This may seem a trivial difference, but there is a major implication for the classroom. With the 'input' model, in planning a lesson, the teacher is, among other things, selecting texts as 'input' for the learners. This gives rise to notions such as 'target language', where particular structures, forms or patterns are designated as content for noticing and study. An affordance model is less directive; the teacher might still select texts on the basis of linguistic or other interest, but would have a lower expectation of what features of that text learners might end up noticing. This at least acknowledges some of the unpredictabilities of language learning.

As we have observed, most language teachers and language learners have anecdotes about classes in which particular items for study were presented, but in which something completely different was actually learnt. 'Affordance' suggests that the focus of a good ESOL lesson, in terms of 'target' language, can be less narrow than a traditional structural syllabus might follow (i.e. the teaching of a single 'form' in a lesson). The aim of the lesson would instead be for all the learners to encounter affordances appropriate to their individual language abilities and their idiolects. The role of the teacher is therefore to manage classroom interaction, and to provide a

wide range of 'learning opportunities' (Allwright and Bailey 1991). The teacher will thus be occupied more with the 'quality of classroom life' than with the efficient teaching of particular target forms (Ivanic and Tseng 2005). This is differentiation[1] writ large, and requires that teachers have excellent language awareness and language-analysis skills, as they need to be ready and able to help learners make the most of 'affordances' as they arise.

This also fits well with the findings of the NRDC's Effective Practice in ESOL project, which described effective teachers as '*bricoleurs*' (literally, handymen) – able to use whatever was to hand to create learning opportunities, highly responsive to learners and able to plan on the spot (Baynham et al. 2007).

'Affordance' also chimes well with the haphazard and serendipitous learning opportunities that learners may have outside class, and goes some way to explaining how people learn languages in naturalistic settings. For instance, a language learner who happens to pass an advertising billboard for a theme park holiday destination, featuring graphics of wild animals and a roller-coaster along with the text, 'Wild animals and wilder rides' might notice a number of different things:

- The correspondence of lexis and images ('animal'/'rides'); this might afford an opportunity for vocabulary acquisition.
- The comparative 'er' form of 'wilder'; this might afford some raised awareness or consolidation of comparative structures.
- Adjective/noun word order.
- The incomplete sentence structure: for an advanced learner this might afford an opportunity to reflect on or further notice how common such elided forms (where part of a sentence or phrase is deliberately omitted – here: 'there are' or 'we have') are in advertising language.

'Automaticization', 'restructuring' and connectionism

Two important concepts derived from cognitive SLA theory are 'automaticization' and 'restructuring'. The first of these, 'automaticization' refers to the move from short-term memory (i.e. controlled and conscious processing) to long-term memory, so that conscious attention is no longer needed. When a piece of new language is learnt, it at first requires considerable conscious attention on the learner's part to actually use it; the learner has to make an effort to recall and think about the pronunciation, for instance, or grammatical form, or syntax, or all three. As time goes by, and with repeated use, it becomes easier and easier to use the new language and less of a conscious effort is required. Until at last, the new language is fully integrated into the learner's repertoire, and is 'automaticized'.

Restructuring is, in Block's (2003: 96) words, 'a two-way process of assimilation and accommodation ... the incorporation of the new ... [and] the destabilisation and eventual reforming of old knowledge'. This recognizes the fundamentally cyclical nature of language learning. That is, the need for teachers and learners to regularly revisit items of language in order to help learners achieve a fuller understanding of them. It is why, typically, grammatical forms such as tenses are taught not once, 'all

in one go', but are revisited many times over. ESOL teaching materials often present just one use or function of a grammatical form at a time – for example the use of the present perfect to talk about experiences – 'I've been to Quito'. The learner will later go on to discover other uses for this form such as talking about present results/effects of past events – 'Someone's spilt coffee all over the rug – it's ruined!') and will 'restructure' their understanding of it.

So, on the one hand, teachers can help learners with the move from conscious to unconscious processing (automaticization) by providing regular analysis and practice of relevant items of lexis, grammar and phonology. The classroom is an ideal place for this, providing the space for both analysis and repetition in a way that the real contexts of language use in the outside world don't. On the other hand, given the exposure of many ESOL learners to English(es) outside the classroom, it is important to select linguistic items for this kind of treatment with an eye on their usefulness and frequency in the 'outside world'. For instance, it may be useful for ESOL learners to pay particular attention to lexical chunks of the kind they might encounter or use in their daily lives. For instance, it might be useful to analyse the following examples of language used to talk about changing plans, or 'hedge', in social situations and teach them as lexical chunks with a characterisitic structure:

- I was intending to go to the library, but I'm not sure if I've time now.
- I was planning to get a little work done, but I'd love to go for a coffee!
- I was hoping to get one in blue or black, but if you've only got silver ...

I was intending/planning/hoping to + infinitive (+ clause) *but* + clause

In any case, the twin concepts of automaticization and restructuring suggest that teachers should divide their time between helping learners pay attention to linguistic items in conscious study, and providing opportunities for practice which help learners 'automaticize' their language use. These linguistic items should be contextualized in ways which reflect the way they are likely to be used by learners in the real world.

However, a view of learning which only focuses on these cognitive processes is a very narrow one; as we indicated in relation to 'input' above, it follows an essentially mechanistic and computational metaphor. There are also some similarities with behaviourism. It is thus no surprise to note that some of the favourite teaching techniques of a behaviourist approach also seem to fit approaches which try to establish automaticization of information processing: oral drilling; 'lockstep staging' – where all of the class are doing the same thing at the same time in a tightly controlled series of steps; intense repetition and highly controlled practice of linguistic items.

A less linear account of language learning is provided by connectionist theories: here, learning a language – or learning anything – is not seen as the sequential acquisition of a set of rules, but as a process of constant restructuring. The trajectory of a learner's developing interlanguage is influenced by many interacting factors; progress and backsliding in equal and unpredictable measures is the norm rather than the exception. There is also interaction between the language forms in a learner's system; when a learner starts to learn a new form, formerly 'mastered' forms may become destabilized. Likewise, seeing a new 'rule' in a new context can temporarily destabilize the learner's understanding of that rule.

TASK 4.7

Many English-language teaching coursebooks for beginner to intermediate learners present the following typical uses of 'will':

- To talk about the future.
- To make predictions, promises, threats and offers.

How do you think a learner makes sense of the following use of 'will' when they first come across a sentence like the one below?

If you come to college by bus you will have noticed the police roadblocks on Gliddon Avenue this morning.

COMMENT 4.7

At first sight this is quite destabilizing. The sentence contains no future reference and is in fact about past time, which appears to contradict the typical use of 'will' for future time. However, on closer analysis, a learner may come to see that the utterance does fit with the use of 'will' for predictions; odd though it may seem at first, this sentence is in fact a prediction about past time, about the unknown, to the speaker, but guessable experiences of the addressee. The learner, in coming to understand this, will experience some 'restructuring' of their concepts of 'will' and of what is meant by 'prediction'. (For an excellent, and fuller, analysis of this, see *The English Verb* (1997) by Michael Lewis.)

A broadly connectionist view of language acquisition may thus explain why learners learn different things from the language they are exposed to; different learners will make different connections depending on the sum of all their language experiences and exposure, both within and without the classroom. And as 'constant restructuring' is by definition an ongoing process, with the raw clay of language constantly being reshaped and reinterpreted as the learner tries to make sense and meaning, there is also great benefit in teachers explicitly linking learners' experiences of language in the classroom with their 'outside' exposure to it.

There is also a clear link to the notion of 'affordances', discussed above. Teachers, therefore, need to be casting their nets quite widely in order to provide learners with the maximum possible opportunities for learning – and this may mean conflicts with a fixed curriculum: 'Much of the language visible in ... classrooms cannot be neatly tied to curricular objectives. It cannot be dismissed as incidental, since it assumes it is a sideline to the main project; the ordered acquisition of language' (Roberts et al. 2004: 14).

Accommodation theory

Bremer et al. (1996) found that when ESOL learners have opportunities to talk to native speakers they do a disproportionate amount of the conversational work in

terms of maintaining mutual understanding; the onus appeared to be on them, not the 'native speakers', to keep the interaction on track. Accommodation theory may go some way to explaining these difficulties and may also account for some phenomena in language use of particular relevance to ESOL learners. During any interaction, language users are constantly adjusting elements of grammar, lexis and phonology to 'accommodate' towards, or away from, their interlocutor(s). This is known as convergence or divergence. Speakers converge when they want to show solidarity with, or sympathy towards, their audience. The former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, often varied his pronunciation. Speaking in formal situations, his accent could broadly be described as standard 'Southern' middle or upper-middle class, betraying his public-school background. But in settings perceived as more informal because of the nature of the audience, such as an appearance on a TV chat show, or during a speech to factory workers, he frequently deviated towards a more lower-middle-class pronunciation common around London called 'Estuary', using glottal stops and dropping consonants (Sylvester 1998). What we don't know is whether this convergence towards his perceived audience was unconscious or deliberate on his part, or indeed whether, as with many politicians, he was coached in it.

Divergence, on the other hand, occurs when speakers wish to create some social distance between themselves and the audience – as in the example of factory workers using stronger vernacular forms when in the presence of temporary learner vacation workers, whom they perceived as being 'posh' (Holmes 2001). Divergence can be a matter of receptiveness in interaction as much as of production. Studies of interaction between speakers of related languages (such as Czech and Slovak, or Swedish and Danish) have consistently found that although the languages appear to be mutually intelligible, speakers of the language of the economically *richer* nation will more regularly claim not to understand speaker of the language of the *poorer* nation.

TASK 4.8

1 Think of some instances when you have converged or diverged from other speakers, or when they have converged with or diverged from you – can you explain these accommodations?
2 In what ways do you think ESOL learners might experience convergence and divergence?

COMMENT 4.8

The first point to make here is that ESOL learners may not always realize when their interlocutors are diverging or converging, or, just as any language user, when they themselves are doing the same. They will also be likely to attribute conversational breakdown to their own 'failures'. ESOL learners are quite likely to encounter divergence in relation to their 'foreign' pronunciation; interlocutors may simply make very limited efforts to understand or claim not to understand at all. In extreme cases interlocutors may understand very well, but refuse to acknowledge this. In such situations, learners are likely to blame their own pronunciation, rather than seeing that the real issue, the factor that is actually causing the divergence, is their perceived 'foreignness', which may have been identified by their dress or skin colour as much as by their pronunciation.

ESOL learners are quite likely to converge towards the pronunciation of those they interract with, or to the variety of language they hear most around them. This may have important implications; most learners will not be at the stage of learning where they can necessarily recognize the social register of language they hear. They may therefore converge towards highly vernacular, informal pronunciations without recognizing these as such. Many ESOL teachers will have encountered learners who have in this way acquired forms such as 'innit?' but who do not necessarily appreciate the social implications of the use of such forms and may consequently use them in quite formal and inappropriate situations. This is not to suggest that such forms or vernacular pronunciations are at all 'wrong', but ESOL teachers clearly have an important role in helping learners to recognize the relationships between language variety and context, and to be self-aware in terms of the language they are using.

Identity

SLA researchers and theorists who have taken what Block calls the 'social turn', in that they regard social factors as legitimate (and crucial) objects of study, are forced to considerations of *identity*. In particular, studies of literacy acquisition have highlighted how learners may encounter conflicts of identity. Brian Street (1995) critiques views that regard language and literacy as merely *functional* or a set of 'skills' which can be unproblematically taught or given to those who lack them. Such a view, he suggests, fails to recognize the true importance and centrality of language and literacy practices in people's lives, and hides the way non-mainstream (or foreign) language and literacy practices are marginalized by 'dominant' ones. The ideological nature of dominant language and literacy practices is therefore disguised.

As learners acquire new literacy or language practices, they may find conflicts with their existing practices: for example, a prestige literacy practice in Arabic relates to reading from the Koran, often in small groups, with particular heed being paid to precise interpretation of syntax and lexis. This may involve very detailed reading of individual sentences or sections, interspersed with discussions of their meaning. In an ESOL context, though, learners may encounter very different yet nevertheless prestige literacy practices – such as reading of academic or 'valued' text, perhaps in preparation for an exam such as IELTs. Here learners will be told they need to skim and scan,[2] skills which both place a very high premium on *speed*. This requires, or produces, a very different orientation towards the text itself – and a learner who has acquired prestige literacy practices in their first language such as the example above, may find

it difficult to approach an evidently 'valued' text in such an apparently contradictory way. Furthermore, such a learner may feel very disoriented and destabilized – this is not just a new 'skill' to acquire, it is a 'skill' that appears to call into question everything they have already learnt, and their self-image as a 'literate' person.

Scott Thornbury (2005) relates an encounter with a learner of his outside the class in downtown Cairo. The conversation ran as follows:

ST: Hey, Hamdi, where are you going?

Hamdi: I go to sporting club.

ST [*Unable to resist a chance to correct*] Go?

Hamdi [*Impatiently*] Oh, go, going, went!

He then asks how we should interpret Hamdi's 'outburst', offering five possibilities, reproduced below:

1 'Correction is for classrooms – the street is for communication!'

2 'You understood what I meant, so why the correction?'

3 'Search me. I still don't know the difference between go/going/went'

4 'Don't expect me to say what I mean and get it right at the same time!'

5 All of the above.

(Thornbury 2005: 31)

Interestingly, Thornbury doesn't question the appropriacy of the use of *English* in downtown Cairo in the first place; he doesn't mention whether he could speak Egyptian Arabic or not, and perhaps Hamdi, rightly or wrongly, was under the impression that Thornbury couldn't. He doesn't address identity or how the act of correction effectively positions Hamdi as a 'learner' even though this is outside the usual learning context. Hamdi might certainly have wanted to resist such positioning; he might regard himself as anything but a learner in such a context. Certainly, he might feel that if the situation merits teacher–learner positioning at all, it is Thornbury who is better qualified to adopt the *learner* role: after all, Thornbury is the foreigner, far less experienced in Egyptian life than he.

Many UK ESOL learners have experiences similar to Hamdi's; they find that they are positioned as 'learners' not just in the classroom, but in many aspects of their daily lives. Yet in many cases, such 'learners' may be highly experienced, highly qualified individuals; they may also find it rather troubling that many of their 'correctors' outside of the classroom appear to be less experienced or less qualified than themselves: 'Teaching and learning processes are different in classrooms where talk is work. Theories of language, teaching and learning are most responsive to learners when the significance of social relations and social identities is understood' (Roberts et al. 2004:16). It is important to bring learners' social relations and social identities into classroom practice. The most obvious way to do this is by allowing

learners to talk about themselves and their own lives, and by providing them with opportunities to do so. Tasks from published materials, or from coursebooks can be *personalized* so that they address learners' own contexts more directly: 'The value of creating spaces for learners to talk about their lives relates directly to their language learning. Learning another language is partly about taking on a new voice, a new set of identities. However, it is also about making the new language real and meaningful to yourself and your life' (Roberts et al. 2004: 36). And, of course, teachers' identities are relevant here too: 'Adult educators need not only to be aware of the belief structures underlying their own philosophies or perspectives on teaching, but also to reflect on how their pedagogical "identities" are constructed in the social and political contexts in which they work' (Morton et al. 2006: 13).

Appropriation

'Appropriation' has usually been used in SLA theory to mean the process by which learners eventually bring new elements of knowledge and language skills into their consciousness. However, as Block (2003) points out, this is a very reduced sense of the original term, used in sociocultural theory, which Wertsch (1998: 53) defines as meaning 'to bring something into oneself, or to make something one's own ... taking something that belongs to others and making it one's own'.

Block describes appropriation as, 'not just the passing of the external to the internal; it is the meeting of the external and the internal to form a synthesised new state' (Block 2003: 103). This fits well with the links noted above between language and identity, and gives some sense of the process through which the emergent identities of language learners may be formed.

There is also something here of a parallel with the 'immigrant experience'; the 'external', the immigrant, meeting the 'internal' of the new country. UK ESOL learners then, may want to make English 'their own' as well as just learn or use it. They may want to 'appropriate' parts of English language and culture, and identity, for themselves: this may be part of their journey towards becoming one deemed 'worthy to speak and listen'.

Conclusions

It seems, then, that whilst SLA researchers and theorists try to find ways of bringing cognitivist and interactionist accounts of language learning together with social analyses, ESOL practitioners have to find ways of incorporating learners' complex and developing identities and their various social contexts into classroom practice. This involves ongoing processes of negotiation, discovery and accommodation. In particular, it means that ESOL practitioners have to find ways to mediate between:

- learners' existing linguistic resources and repertoires and their uses of English;

- literacy and language practices in learners' first/other languages, and literacy and language practices in English;
- learners' developing identities and their social positioning.

It also means that, at different stages of the teaching and learning process, teachers (and learners) will have different orientations to the subject matter, language, that they are addressing. They will, at different times, have a greater or lesser interest in,

- *Social and functional aspects of language use*: for instance, politeness routines or how cultural allegiances are expressed in language, and the social and interpersonal meanings created in interactions. These will help learners to focus on how they can 'do' things with language in the real social world, and how they can express and develop identities in the new language.
- *Analyses of form* (textual, grammatical, lexical and phonological): to help learners develop or restructure their understandings of the forms of language.
- Fluency: providing opportunities to automaticize language use, and to 'appropriate' the new language:

> 'A model of second language socialisation is more appropriate than second language acquisition in that it assumes that language is developed through social relationships and prepares learners for communicating in a community of practice. However, even this model cannot fully account for the different goals and identities which participating in complex urban environments entails (Kramsch 2002).
>
> (Roberts et al. 2004: 14)

Notes

1 See Chapter 7 for discussion of differentiation.
2 See Chapter 5 for discussion of these reading skills.

Part 2

Teaching and learning ESOL