

## Language Acquisition: A Unifying Theory for College Composition

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In a recent issue of *College Composition and Communication*, Maxine Hairston discusses the strides made in re-establishing composition as a discipline—the increase in the number of graduate programs in rhetoric and composition, the number of tenure-track positions, the number and size of composition conferences, and the number of rhetoric and composition journals (“Diversity” 179). This re-establishment of rhetoric as a discipline is a direct result of the changes occurring within the discipline in the past twenty-five years—changes essential to the definition and practice of composition. This new paradigm of writing instruction includes changes in both the purpose and the pedagogical practices of composition classrooms (Hairston, “The Winds of Change” 86).

Yet even with this fine-tuned focus of both purpose (the “what” of composition) and pedagogical methods (the “how” of composition), a sense of stability is lacking (the “why” of composition). Programs exist that do not reflect the changing paradigm, and even in programs that are attempting to apply the changing perspective, questions abound on how to accomplish the specific goals set for freshman composition. Both appropriate teaching methods and appropriate content materials are needed to produce a unified focus for accomplishing the purpose of composition pedagogy.

### Teaching Methods for Composition Classrooms

In the search for appropriate methods, composition teachers try new techniques—some effective, others ineffective. Whether from a colleague, a journal article, a textbook, or the latest conference, teachers look for what might work in their classrooms. Successful methods are transferred from one classroom situation to another. The result is that some identical methods are implemented in classrooms that represent extremely divergent philosophical perspectives. Whether or not the teacher’s underlying theoretical philosophy (either articulated or unspoken) supports the pedagogy seems to matter little; the new strategy is included—the newest “in” method is adopted.

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In the search for appropriate methods, composition teachers try new techniques—some effective, others ineffective. Whether from a colleague, a journal article, a textbook, or the latest conference, teachers look for what might work in their classrooms. Successful methods are transferred from one classroom situation to another. The result is that some identical methods are implemented in classrooms that represent extremely divergent philosophical perspectives. Whether or not the teacher’s underlying theoretical philosophy (either articulated or unspoken) supports the pedagogy seems to matter little; the new strategy is included—the newest “in” method is adopted.

One example of a current teaching practice that may clash with the theoretical perspectives held by the instructor is that of peer editing. Teachers whose philosophies range from current traditional (atheoretical), to liberal-

culture, to rhetorical, to expressive, can be found using peer editing. Peer editing is an appropriate pedagogical practice well-suited to teaching students about writing for specific audiences, and as such is applicable not only to academic discourse but also to any discourse where the peers are, or represent, an authentic audience. It is not appropriate in classrooms where, in reality, the instructor is the only audience.

For example, when a student writes a paper and goes through a peer-editing process in which issues of clarity, development, organization, and mechanics are satisfactorily addressed, yet has the paper rejected by the instructor, peer editing is an empty exercise. The peers in this situation are not an authentic audience. In this instance, the transfer of a successful, appropriate teaching practice results in a clash of practice and theory; peer editing does not reflect the instructor's underlying theoretical framework in regard to audience.

### Content for Composition Classrooms

In addition to the potential clash between specific pedagogical practices and theoretical perspectives, the content of the composition classrooms is presently in a state of tension. Although composition study has emerged (or in some cases, is emerging) from the English department as a discipline in its own right, controversy continues over what content is appropriate for a freshman composition course. Even as more and more composition programs focus on writing itself as the content of this new paradigm, another content for freshman writing programs has emerged (Hairston, "Diversity"). Rather than focusing on literature or literary criticism, expressive/personal discourse, or grammar studies, this newly emerging content instead focuses on a social-political ideology. This social-political model is not informed by composition research, is not informed by rhetorical principles, is not informed by student-centered pedagogy. Rather, this new model "puts dogma before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student" (180). Rather than composition courses devoted to teaching about writing and learning, composition serves as a vehicle for a particular content, a particular way of thinking, a particular ideology.

After 30 years of progress in composition study, the gains are at risk because a sound theoretical framework for validating pedagogical practices has been slow to emerge. Even if this new socio-political model described by Hairston does not become entrenched in the composition classroom, even if the liberal culture model and the personal/expressive model are finally dying out, even if grammar and mechanics no longer dominate, how long will it be before yet another model emerges that threatens the focus of composition pedagogy? If the progress Hairston refers to is to be consolidated, a theoretical framework that provides stability for the gains in our discipline must be operational. Composition practices will continue to be buffeted if theoretical justifications

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Not only is a theory necessary to support pedagogical choices in methodology and content, but, due to the changing nature of higher education and the population served, a theoretical perspective that accommodates this change is imperative. What is needed for composition study is a theory that is flexible yet stable, a theory that adapts to changing student needs, a theory that supports and encourages professional growth, a theory that accommodates discourse evolution—a theory that in fact explains how adults acquire written academic discourse. Only with a sound theoretical basis to support pedagogical practices will the discipline keep from blowing about in the "winds of change." "Only a general theory can tell us how the parts fit together, whether results are contradictory or consistent with other results" (Krashen, *Writing 2*).

### Language Acquisition Theory

Language acquisition theory is the theory that can consolidate rhetoric's standing in the academy. Language acquisition can provide an umbrella to both unify and justify current pedagogical practices, provide a rubric to evaluate current practices, provide a rationale for choosing some materials and methodologies over others, and support the purpose defined in the new paradigm of composition study.

In this paper, we will summarize findings in two areas that have contributed to the theory of language acquisition: first, Brian Cambourne's work regarding conditions necessary for first language acquisition, and second, Stephen Krashen's work in second language acquisition (ESL), specifically comprehensible input and the affective filter.

### First Language Acquisition

In *The Whole Story: Natural Learning and the Acquisition of Literacy in the Classroom*, Brian Cambourne details strategies to promote the development of literacy in a classroom setting. These strategies are based on a model of learning involving seven conditions identified in ethnographic studies of oral acquisition among young children.

Cambourne asserts that a pedagogy has evolved within each culture that has proven to be highly effective in initiating each new member of the culture into the language system. With very few exceptions, children acquire the vocabulary, the complex syntactical structures, and the social dimensions of the language system into which they are born (32). Not only do children acquire these typical language conventions, but they also become proficient in a relatively short period of 5 or 6 years. Cambourne contends that even though cultures may vary, certain features appear to be constant and provide the conditions that permit the acquisition of oral language. The seven conditions

Cambourne identifies from his ethnographic studies are as follows: immersion, demonstration, expectation, responsibility, employment, approximation, and response. A brief summary of each of the conditions follows.

**Immersion.** A child born into a culture, any culture, is surrounded by actions, artifacts, and practitioners of the language system he/she will acquire. The practitioners engage in meaningful language exchanges for real purposes, thereby modeling and surrounding the learner with language. Because of the ongoing nature of this discourse, the impetus to acquire language and become a participant is intense. The pervasiveness of this language provides the backdrop—the immersion necessary for oral language acquisition (Cambourne 32-33).

**Demonstration.** The language users of diverse cultures and subcultures implement language continually in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes. Language demonstrations include both sequence of sounds and the resulting actions brought about by these sounds. Although language acquisition depends on these demonstrations, specific instruction is not generally provided; rather, demonstrations involve the natural, meaningful use of language. Demonstrations are, according to Cambourne, the raw data that learners draw on as they work toward mastering their native tongue (34). In this sense, demonstration and immersion together provide the framework for language acquisition.

**Expectation.** Within this all-encompassing cultural, linguistic framework, parents and other significant adults assume children will acquire their native language and communicate these expectations to each child (Cambourne 35). Adults in all societies *expect* the children to learn to talk, and this expectation exerts a powerful, positive force on the learner not only concerning the content (language) but also the capability of each child to accomplish the task (acquisition).

**Responsibility.** Responsibility in oral language acquisition reflects an attitude held by society-at-large and significant others in particular. In addition to the numerous demonstrations occurring within a complex language setting, adults (parents/tutors) allow each learner to acquire vocabulary, syntax, and cultural features of language in non-prescribed rates and order; that is, each learner is responsible for the rate and the particular order of acquisition. Demonstrations on the part of the “experts” continue as meaningful language exchanges while learners focus on specific attributes of the demonstrations (Cambourne 36-37).

**Approximation.** New members of the oral language community are not initially expected to achieve fluent, mature competency. Rather than waiting until mastery is achieved and all conventions internalized, adults expect and accept speech approximations from the new members. Adults accept incorrect pronunciation, lack of syntactical maturity, and unconventional usage. Only when meaning is seriously compromised do adults intervene (Cambourne 37-38).

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**Employment.** Young learners need time and opportunity to practice emerging oral language skills both with others and alone. The natural learning environment allows an almost limitless amount of practice for emergent language. Children interact at will with others in meaningful ways and employ language skills in varieties of meaningful situations. Even alone at play, children practice language skills (Cambourne 38).

**Response.** When parents or other language "experts" respond to the young learners, the emphasis is on a sharing of information rather than the degree and exactitude of control the learner has achieved. The adult, rather than consciously formulating a behavioristic response, engages in an exchange of information with the learner and supplies missing parts of the child's approximation without drawing attention to the gaps. Although these exchanges vary from culture to culture and even from subculture to subculture, there are certain similarities: One, the responses are readily available and are non-threatening, and two, there is no penalty for incorrect approximation on the second try—in fact, there is no limit to the number of exchanges (Cambourne 38-40).

### Second Language Acquisition

In addition to Cambourne's contributions to a theory of language acquisition, Stephen Krashen has developed a comprehensive theory of language acquisition, particularly in regard to English as a Second Language (ESL). We will focus on three concepts of Krashen's work: first, language acquisition versus language learning; second, comprehensible input as the necessary requisite for language acquisition; and third, consideration of how the affective filter impinges on language acquisition.

**Acquisition versus Learning.** Krashen has articulated differences between "learned" or conscious language and "acquired" or unconscious language (*Input Hypothesis* 100-102). Acquired language is internalized unconsciously or "naturally" and enables fluency in both oral and written language production. "It appears to require, minimally, participation in natural communication situations, and is the way children gain knowledge of first and second languages" ("Monitor Model" 213). With internalization, all aspects of language may thus be acquired including content, concepts, vocabulary, syntax, organization, and mechanics. Even though fluent language production results from acquisition, this does not necessarily result in the ability to articulate language rules.

Krashen compares this process of acquisition to the process of digestion ("Effective Second"). Just as individuals from various cultures, languages, and dialects eat a variety of foods and observe various customs related to food preparation, acquisition can involve great variety in content. Yet, no matter what the culture, no matter what the food, there is one and only one process of digestion—one and only one process of language acquisition. Krashen also

suggests that this process is the same for both children and adults ("Accounting").

Learned language, on the other hand, is a conscious process that emphasizes linguistic form and application of rules of language. Learned language does not necessarily facilitate fluent production of either oral or written language. Even though the "learned" rules may be articulated, unless they are "acquired," language production will not result ("Monitor Model" 213-14). Learned language often focuses on discrete particles of language rather than on a meaningful message. Acquisition is how first language fluency occurs; acquisition then is the aim for second language. For acquisition to occur, Krashen proposes two other components: (1) the input hypothesis or comprehensible input and (2) the affective filter ("The Input Hypothesis" 418-19).

**Comprehensible Input.** The first of these components—comprehensible input—posits that we acquire language in only one way: when we understand messages. Comprehensible input, according to Krashen, is the essential ingredient for any acquisition to occur. Thus when one is learning a second language, a message needs to be transmitted concerning an idea with meaning—true communication. Assuming the desired result of second language acquisition is the ability to understand and communicate in the second language, the necessary ingredient must be input that is understandable, i.e., a message with meaning for the acquirer. This meaning, according to Krashen, will involve not bits of arbitrary grammar and lists of vocabulary to memorize but rather, in this paradigm, will involve whole text—an understandable message ("The Input Hypothesis" 403).

According to Krashen, environmental conditions generally facilitate second language acquisition for children. Interacting with target-language speaking children usually makes messages understandable. For example, in the game of soccer, much of the message is concrete and can be demonstrated—kick, ball, run, score, and so forth. Children also deal with concrete language when counting, naming foods, clothing, body parts, etc. All these tangible items effectively provide comprehensible input ("Effective Second").

Adults, on the other hand, often must deal with abstract, incomprehensible input as they attempt to acquire a second language. For this reason, Krashen says a sheltered environment, the ESL classroom, is an appropriate place to acquire a second language. Only in a classroom can concrete, comprehensible input be assured ("Accounting" 220). Real, meaningful messages can make up the classroom environment for adults.

**Affective Filter.** Even with adequate comprehensible input, language acquisition sometimes does not occur; comprehensible input is not enough. To account for this phenomenon, Krashen hypothesizes that within the individual learner there exists an "affective filter" (*Input Hypothesis* 100) that functions as a blocking device. The filter screens out input and prevents it from reaching

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### Summary

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what Chomsky calls the language-acquisition device. No matter how pertinent and understandable the content, if the environment is threatening and does not promote risk-taking, the language will not be acquired—the “affective filter” will effectively inhibit acquisition.

Consideration of this phenomenon is crucial in the design and choice of pedagogical practices. According to Krashen, the classroom situation is not only appropriate for providing comprehensible input but is also appropriate for reducing anxiety, providing motivation, and promoting high self-esteem, thereby, effectively keeping the affective filter lowered (“The Input Hypothesis” 422).

### Summary

Drawing from these two areas of study—first language acquisition and second language acquisition—we can identify two general principles. First, acquisition involves the ability to understand and use language for real purposes, whether those purposes involve oral or written language, reading or writing, speaking or listening. For acquisition to occur, there must be a meaningful message communicated—comprehensible input. Second, the environment must facilitate the acquisition by providing a non-threatening atmosphere whereby the affective filter is lowered and engagement with the targeted language is enhanced. These principles provide the structure necessary for building a theoretical rubric for college composition and, thereby, effective composition pedagogy.

Composition has come a long way in the last thirty years. However, as Hairston points out (“Diversity”), the current situation is jeopardized because of other emerging perspectives. This current situation necessitates a theoretical framework to keep pedagogy focused on goals of composition instruction. Language acquisition provides that theoretical framework.

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