An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition for the ALT

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Introduction

The following is a pedagogical guide to provide Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) with a general blueprint that will assist them in their planning and designing of lessons and curriculum in the Japanese High School and Junior High School. The purpose of this guide is to assist ALTs in the development of lessons and curriculum in situations where they are given extra freedom and control over lesson planning. In such cases, ALTs with little to no experience or knowledge in language teaching may feel overwhelmed and perhaps even frustrated. Basic questions which may arise include: “What should I teach?” and “How should I teach?” This guide endeavors to answer such questions through discussing relevant SLA theories with the hope that readers will be left with a better sense of how to best design their lessons and activities to benefit their students’ learning.

To begin, it is first important to look at the history of different theories, methods and approaches to better grasp where we currently stand in the world of language teaching. I have attached a brief history of language teaching along with summaries of the most popular language theories and teaching methods. This excellent visual history and summary list was created by Ben Shearon who is currently teaching at Tohoku University.
A Brief History of Language Teaching

Modern techniques for teaching foreign languages draw on a rich and convoluted history, originating in the study of Classical Latin in Europe and passing through several stages. Different countries, organizations, and teachers prefer different methods, and almost all of the theories and approaches shown in the diagram below still carry weight somewhere.

Figure 1 is my attempt at displaying this history visually:

Figure 1
Initial Approaches

Initial approaches came about before the Second World War, when operational necessity fuelled a new interest in language teaching methods.

The Study of Classical Latin

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, Latin was studied in Europe as an intellectual exercise, with students memorizing grammar and vocabulary with the aim of reading and writing accurately. Students spent their time committing declensions and conjugations to memory, and wrestling with grammar and rhetoric.

The Grammar Translation Method

The Grammar Translation Method appeared after modern languages (French, German, English) started to be taught in schools. Teachers of these new languages fell back on the traditional way of teaching Latin, and so the fundamentals of the language class did not change.

The Grammar Translation method is dull and monotonous for students, but easy for teachers to implement and teach. It is still widely used, even though there is no theory that justifies it or that “attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology, or educational theory” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

The Direct Method

Also known as the Natural Method or the Berlitz Method, the Direct Method grew out of dissatisfaction with previous methods of instruction. According to it, classroom instruction is carried out entirely in the target language, preferably native speakers. It is essentially the “product of enlightened amateurism” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Its drawbacks include the need for skilled native speakers as teachers and the rigidity of trying to run classes completely in the target language when sometimes a quick lapse into L1 would solve problems more quickly.

Situational Language Teaching

Situational language teaching emphasized oral practice, grammar, and sentence patterns. It also introduced the extremely influential P-P-P lesson model (presentation, practice, production) that is still visible in schools all over Japan.

The method consists of using concrete objects, pictures, and realia along with actions and gestures to demonstrate the meaning of new items. This allows teachers to dispense with explanation or L1.
The Guru Age

Following the Second World War, and up to the 1980s, EFL was dominated by a succession of methods that claimed to have the answers to the problem of how to teach. While none of them provided a satisfactory complete solution, many have useful elements.

The Audiolingual Method (the Army Method)

An intensive, oral-based approach developed by the US Army to train interpreters. It involves memorizing dialogues and doing language drills. It went out of fashion due to attacks on its theoretical foundations and disappointment in its results. It was also felt to be boring and unsatisfying for students.

Total Physical Response (TPR)

Created by James Asher, a professor of psychology, TPR is an excellent complementary technique, especially for beginners’ and children’s classes. As a self-contained method, however, it proved inadequate at intermediate and advanced levels.

The Silent Way

Based on the premise that teachers should be silent while students should produce language in the classroom, the Silent Way depends on colored wooden rods and pronunciation charts to aid students in figuring out language with minimal teacher input.

Community Language Learning

Based on counseling and psychology, CLL involves students and teacher forming a community that works together to figure out the target language. Teachers need special training in counseling techniques.

Suggestopedia

Slightly ridiculous method that was devised as a kind of placebo, using scientific jargon and baroque music to create the right learning mood in learners.

Whole Language

Whole language is based on “authenticity” of language. It is characterized by only using authentic texts, having meaningful interaction, and doing exercises with real purpose. The actual characteristics of Whole Language are very hard to pin down beyond this.

Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP)

NLP is a set of working principles for directing or guiding therapeutic change, which have been adapted for EFL. More an attitude than an approach.
Integrating Approaches

In the 1980s and 90s, the EFL world slowly moved to a new approach: the eclectic approach. Self-contained methods with all the answers had been discredited, and teachers came to realize that they were the best arbiters of what worked in their classroom.

From then on, the eclectic method has involved taking effective techniques and integrating them into a personalized approach.

Multiple Intelligences

Based on the work of Howard Gardner, MI refers to a learner-based philosophy that characterizes human intelligence as having multiple dimensions that should be acknowledged in education. He lists linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligences.

The Lexical Approach

The lexical approach takes the view that the building blocks of language learning and communication are not grammar, functions, or notions, but lexis (vocabulary).

Competency Based Language Learning

Competency Based Education focuses on the outcomes or outputs of learning. It is a kind of performance-based teaching: looking at what learners will be able to do with language, regardless of how they learned it. Used in ESL contexts (particularly Australia’s Migrant Education Program).

Communicative Language Learning

Communicative language learning is another vague and broad “approach” that commands widespread support. It is based upon a communicative model of language and language use, where learners are involved as much as possible in real communication (information gaps, etc.). The goal is communicative competence, the ability to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately.

The Natural Approach

Similar to Communicative Language Learning, the Natural Approach was developed by Tracy Terrell and Stephen Krashen, who refer to it as a communicative approach.

It focuses on the difference between acquisition (unconscious language uptake) and learning (conscious language uptake) and attempts to encourage the former.

There are two other major theories involved:

- The input hypothesis states that we learn best by understanding language slightly beyond our level (l+1).
- The affective filter hypothesis states that we learn best if relaxed and comfortable.
Co-operative Language Learning

Cooperative Language Learning is an approach to teaching that makes maximum use of cooperative activities involving pairs and small groups of learners in the classroom.

It is designed to foster cooperation, critical thinking skills, and develop communicative competence.

Content Based Instruction

In Content Based Instruction, teaching is based around the content or information that students will acquire. It is based on the following two principles:

- People learn language more successfully when they use it as a means of acquiring information rather than as an end in itself
- CBI better reflects learners’ needs for learning a second language

Content Based Instruction is primarily used in ESL.

Task Based Language Learning

Task Based Language Learning focuses on the processes that students attempt rather than the content or outcomes. It is strongly linked to Communicative Language Learning.

Recent Developments

Recent developments, especially in technology, hint at revolutions to come in the world of EFL, but it seems likely that any innovations would be integrated into current theoretical frameworks rather than embraced as replacements.

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

One of the hottest areas in EFL recently, CALL has been further enhanced in the spread of broadband internet and online class management technologies. It seems likely that computers will continue to play increasingly important roles in language learning, whether through advances in language learning software or by facilitating the development of virtual classrooms.

Corpus Linguistics

Corpus linguistics uses computers to analyze huge databases of language (corpora) and determine word frequencies and usages. It has been used to make a new generation of dictionaries and is set to revolutionize how we think about language.

Machine Translation

Not so much teaching, but rapid advances in machine translation could conceivably eliminate the need to learn foreign languages at some point in the future!
Theories help to guide teachers in lesson planning helping them to choose appropriate methods and approaches.

• Theories help to answer the why and how in lesson planning.

• Theories can also help teachers to validate what they do in the classroom.

Choosing an Approach

The Approach

Approach VS. Method

Note: An approach is a cohesive set of theoretical and practical beliefs. It is the why in language teaching and it provides certain principles. As for method, it is the how in language teaching; it is the application of the aspects of an approach.

You may favor a single approach or method for teaching, but I encourage ALTs to borrow ideas from a variety of teaching methods and approaches to establish a desired framework. First, it is important to realize that communicative competence does not hold the same importance in Japan, as the focus for learners is on preparing themselves to meet the challenges of the strict requirements of university entrance exams which give saliency to lexical and grammatical knowledge rather than English communication. Consequently, the grammar-translation method is still present despite the push towards a more communicative approach. Current curriculum still gives weight to reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar leaving listening and especially speaking on a much lower pedestal. Lessons also tend to be teacher-centered rather than student-centered.
In an attempt to balance this curriculum weight scale, I have put together a teaching approach which borrows from several different approaches to provide ALTs with a framework from which they can build and design lessons and curriculum for their students. Using such a framework is most helpful when deciding on what to teach, what activities to use, and why. ALTs are encouraged to research and explore other theories and methods to create their own communicative curriculum to complement MEXT goals.

**Suggested Teaching Approach**

The suggested approach is a multifaceted approach incorporating ideas from the *Communicative and Natural Approach* to Language Teaching, the *Lexical Approach*, *Task-based Language Teaching*, *Social Constructivist Theory* and *Multiple Intelligences Theory*. The key principles can be summarized as follows:

**Language is communication**

Activities should aim at promoting interaction and be designed to focus on completing tasks through negotiation of meaning with teachers facilitating learner interaction. The aim is communicative competence. In this approach language is used in real context; grammar is taught both deductively and inductively; the target language is a vehicle for classroom communication as oppose to an object of study; the students’ L1 or native language can be used if necessary and a variety of methods or approaches can be applied. Fluency is important; accuracy is not of importance; students are free to make errors since the goal is meaningful communication; drilling is discouraged. It is a learner-centered approach in which students are given the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions.

**Acquisition verses learning**

Acquisition, according to Stephen Krashen, is a subconscious process whereas learning is a conscious process. Krashen believed that second language learners should attempt to acquire linguistic rules subconsciously and in a natural way much like a child acquires
language. Furthermore, the acquirer must receive comprehensible input through reading or hearing language that is slightly above their current level. Also, Krashen discusses what he terms an affective filter. A learner who is tense, anxious, or bored will block out input, making it unavailable for acquisition. Thus, depending on the learner’s state of mind, the filter limits what is acquired. The filter will be up when the learner is self-conscious or unmotivated. It will be down when the learner is motivated or feeling relaxed. ¹

For more information on Krashen’s Input Hypothesis:


The art of language instruction

There are two popular approaches to language instruction. The first is the Present, Practice, Produce (PPP) paradigm and the second is the Task-based approach. The former is a much more direct approach which involves the teacher first presenting the new language and demonstrating its use. This is followed by controlled practice coupled with a shift from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness. Finally, students practice what they have learned with student talk-time at its maximum.

Conversely, In task-based learning, the content students are to learn develops as students progress through a given task. First, the ALT and JTE explain how they will complete the task and review any vocabulary or grammar that will be useful. Next, the teachers monitor and record language problems met during the task. Finally, the teacher reviews the problems that students encountered during the task and has them practice again. The task-based approach is a smart choice for students who are motivated and work well independently. It uses language as a vehicle for authentic real world needs allowing students to experiment with their store of knowledge rather than
just practicing one pre-selected item. I recommend ALTs to use this latter approach when possible.

**For more information on task-based language teaching:**

Jane Willis, A Framework for Task-Based Learning, Longman ELT

**Example of a Task-based Lesson:**

Task-based grammar teaching – tips and activities by Lindsay Clandfield

http://www.onestopenglish.com/section.asp?docid=144974

**Language is like a tapestry**

The development of oral and listening skills is a priority; however, reading and writing skills should not be ignored. Oxford’s analogy of a tapestry is perhaps best in portraying the complexity and importance of integration in ESL/EFL curriculum and instruction. Oxford aptly describes integration as a tapestry intricately woven from many strands in such a way as to create, ideally, a tapestry that is strong, colourful and beautiful. She argues that one of the most important of these strands consists of the four primary skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Oxford posits “the skill strand of the tapestry leads to optimal ESL/EFL communication when the skills are interwoven”. She stresses this *integrated-skill approach* as opposed to the compartmentalization of skills or what she terms the segregated-skill approach. In short, curriculum that offers the potential for a variety of skills to be used during classroom activities is an ideal curriculum.

**The L1 as a teaching and learning tool**

JTEs know the learner’s native language (L1) which gives them the possibility to make L1 an ally to enhance learning. Therefore, activities involving L1 and L2 comparison and translation are extremely helpful in the learning process. Using the L1 is also beneficial when explaining difficult concepts. The use of L1 as a means of instruction should be kept at a minimum, but is expected more at lower stages of learning in order to offer learners affective support and increase their self-confidence.
Research shows that we ‘chunk’ language

“Without grammar little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”
David Wilkins

Since you are in a fortunate situation which allows you to create materials for monolingual students, the materials can expose learners to an exceptional quantity of vocabulary. This brings us to our next question, “How does one teach vocabulary?” One possible approach to teaching vocabulary is what is termed, The Lexical Approach. This approach is based on a computer analysis of language which identifies the most common and hence, most useful words, in the language and their various uses.

**Important Points Regarding Lexical Theory**

- Words typically co-occur with other words. These co-occurrences (or chunks) are an aid to fluency.

**Example:**
By the way
If I were you
out of your mind
I know what you mean
terrible accident
That’s a great idea

- Learners pass through a stage where they use a high percentage of prefabricated chunks. *How are you? Fine, thank you. And you?*

- Teaching vocabulary as a list of isolated words de-contextualizes language – context is extremely important!

- Fluent and appropriate language use requires collocational knowledge. According to Pawley and Syder (1983)⁴ the best explanation of how language users can choose the
most appropriate ways to say things from a large range of possible options (nativelike selection), is that units of language of clause length or longer are stored as chunks in the memory. They suggest that this explanation means that most words are stored many times, once as an individual word and numerous times in larger stored chunks.

- Memorized clauses and clause sequences make up a large percentage of the fluent stretches of speech heard in everyday conversation.

"It is our ability to use lexical phrases that helps us to speak with fluency. This prefabricated speech has both the advantages of more efficient retrieval and of permitting speakers (and learners) to direct their attention to the larger structure of the discourse, rather than keeping it narrowly focused on individual words as they are produced" (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992)⁵.

Finally, syllabuses should include only maximally useful language items. Vocabulary items should reflect the needs and interests of your students. Focus on the words they need to communicate effectively in English. Also, phonological aspects should be dealt with in the material and contain only those especially difficult for Japanese learners. For example, Japanese learners tend to confuse the phonemes /r/ and /l/ and /b/ and /v/. Thus, emphasis should be given to these.

For more information regarding the lexical approach:


Learners need social interaction

Social constructivism stresses the importance of social interaction and cooperation when learning. Thus, constructivist research examines learners engaged in social practices and cooperative learning to see how such individuals construct meaning out of the input received during interactions. Social constructivist theory owes much to
its greatest contributor, Lev Semeonovich Vygotsky. Perhaps his most monumental contribution to constructivist theory is his work relating to what he termed the Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD. Vygotsky defines ZPD as:

“The difference between the child’s development level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.85). 

Neo-Vygotskyans commonly use the scaffold metaphor to describe ZPD. During social learning one’s understanding is scaffolded or raised by another person who is operating at a slightly higher level closing the gap between a learners existing developmental state and their potential development. In short, a student is able to do more with the help of adults or peers than if he or she were alone. Furthermore, social learning encompasses other benefits such as increased empathy, a sense of belonging and better communication skills, all of which are supported by a cooperative community which in turn increases a participant’s self-esteem and consequently, further decreases inhibition and other affective factors that plague learners. Group activities with teacher facilitation can accomplish this. Ask your JTE to help you organize students into groups so that higher level students are paired with lower level students.
For more information:
Website: [http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/constructivism.htm]
On cooperative Learning:
Website: [http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/coopcollab/index.html]

Also, see Krashen’s Input Hypothesis for more on affective factors (p.23).

People learn differently

The Theory of Multiple Intelligences was developed in 1983 by Dr. Howard Gardner, professor of education at Harvard University. The theory suggests that the traditional notion of intelligence, based on I.Q. testing, is too limited. In response to this, Dr. Gardner proposes eight different intelligences to account for a broader range of human potential in children and adults. These intelligences are as follows:

**Linguistic intelligence** ("word smart"):  
Excellent Speakers and Listeners.  
Work best through lectures, recordings and discussions.

**Logical-mathematical intelligence** ("number/reasoning smart")  
Above average aptitude for problem solving.  
Work best through classifications and problem solving activities.

**Visual/Spatial intelligence** ("picture smart")  
Imaginative and creative.  
Good at reading body language.  
Work best through drawing and visual diagrams.

**Bodily-Kinesthetic intelligence** ("body smart")  
Understands sensory material from hands on experience.
Work best through lessons requiring movement.

**Musical intelligence** ("music smart")

Highly responsive to auditory stimuli. 
Work best while listening to music.

**Interpersonal intelligence** ("people smart")

Sociable and excellent at working in groups. 
Work best through collaboration and cooperation.

**Intrapersonal intelligence** ("self smart")

Reflective and independent thinkers. 
Understand their own strengths and weaknesses. 
Work best through self-evaluations and individually paced projects.

**Naturalist intelligence** ("nature smart")

Excellent understanding of biology and the natural world. 
Work best through "show and tell" and field trips.

For more information on the M.I Theory:

[http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/mi/index.html](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/mi/index.html)

As ALTs, we can apply M.I. theory by simply creating lessons that aim at several intelligences. If you are having trouble teaching certain students through traditional linguistic instruction you may want to adjust your lesson to facilitate effective learning.

In conclusion, I hope you have found this brief introduction to Second Language Acquisition interesting and useful. If you are interested in learning more or perhaps pursuing a career in ESL, please feel free to contact me at any time.

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Bibliography


