Teaching Languages to Young Learners

Lynne Cameron

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2001
Fourth printing 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Sabon 10/12 pt CE

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 77325 3 Hardback
ISBN 0 521 77434 9 Paperback

Contents

1 Children learning a foreign language

1.1 Taking a learning-centred perspective

What is different about teaching a foreign language to children, in contrast to teaching adults or adolescents? Some differences are immediately obvious: children are often more enthusiastic and lively as learners. They want to please the teacher rather than their peer group. They will have a go at an activity even when they don't quite understand why or how. However, they also lose interest more quickly and are less able to keep themselves motivated on tasks they find difficult. Children do not find it as easy to use language to talk about language; in other words, they do not have the same access as older learners to metalanguage that teachers can use to explain about grammar or discourse. Children often seem less embarrassed than adults at talking in a new language, and their lack of inhibition seems to help them get a more native-like accent. But these are generalisations which hide the detail of different children, and of the skills involved in teaching them. We need to unpack the generalisations to find out what lies underneath as characteristic of children as language learners. We will find that important differences do arise from the linguistic, psychological and social development of the learners, and that, as a result, we need to adjust the way we think about the language we teach and the classroom activities we use. Although conventional language teaching terms like 'grammar' and 'listening' are used in connection with the young learner classroom, understanding of what these mean *to the children who are learning them* may need to differ from how they are understood in mainstream language teaching.

In the learning-centred perspective taken in this book, knowledge about children's learning is seen as central to effective teaching. Successful lessons and activities are those that are tuned to the learning needs of pupils, rather than to the demands of the next text-book unit, or to the interests of the teacher. I distinguish a *learning*-centred perspective from '*learner*-centred' teaching. Learner-centred teaching places the child at the centre of teacher thinking and curriculum planning. While this is a great improvement on placing the subject or the curriculum at the centre, I have found that it is not enough. In centring on the child, we risk losing sight of what it is we are trying to do in schools, and of the enormous potential that lies beyond the child.

Imagine a child standing at the edge of a new country that represents new ideas and all that can be learnt; ahead of the child are paths through valleys and forests, mountains to be climbed and cities to be explored. The child, however, may not be aware of the vast possibilities on offer, and, being a child, may either be content with the first stream or field s/he comes across, or may rush from one new place to the next without stopping to really explore any. If a teacher's concern is centred on the child, there is a temptation to stay in that first place or to follow the child. I have seen too many classrooms where learners are enjoying themselves on intellectually undemanding tasks but failing to learn as much as they might. The time available in busy school timetables for language teaching is too short to waste on activities that are fun but do not maximise learning. The teacher has to do what the child may not be able to do: to keep in sight the longer view, and move the child towards increasingly demanding challenges, so that no learning potential is wasted. A learning-centred perspective on teaching will, I believe, help us to do that more effectively.

In this chapter I give an overview of theory and research relevant to children's language learning. The field of teaching young learners, particularly in teaching English, has expanded enormously in the last 10 years but is only just beginning to be researched. We need therefore to draw on work from beyond language classrooms: in child development, in learning theory, in first language development, and in the development of a second language in bilingual contexts. Implications for teaching young learners are taken from each of these and used to establish guiding principles and a theoretical framework to be developed in the rest of the book. I begin with the work of two of the major theorists in developmental psychology, Piaget and Vygotsky, highlighting key ideas from their work that can inform how we think of the child as a language learner.

1.2 Piaget

1.2.1 The child as active learner

Piaget's concern was with how young children function in the world that surrounds them, and how this influences their mental development. The child is seen as continually interacting with the world around her/him, solving problems that are presented by the environment. It is through taking action to solve problems that learning occurs. For example, a very young child might encounter the problem of how to get food from her bowl into her mouth. In solving the problem, with a spoon or with

fingers, the child learns the muscle control and direction-finding needed to feed herself. The knowledge that results from such action is not imitated or in-born, but is *actively constructed* by the child.

What happens early on with concrete objects, continues to happen in the mind, as problems are confronted internally, and action taken to solve them or think them through. In this way, *thought is seen as deriving from action*; action is internalised, or carried out mentally in the imagination, and in this way thinking develops. Piaget gives a much less important role to language in cognitive development than does Vygotsky. It is action, rather than the development of the first language which, for Piaget, is fundamental to cognitive development.

Piagetian psychology differentiates two ways in which development can take place as a result of activity: *assimilation* and *accommodation*. Assimilation happens when action takes place without any change to the child; accommodation involves the child adjusting to features of the environment in some way. Returning to the example of feeding, let's imagine what might happen when a child, who has learnt to use a spoon, is presented with a fork to eat with. She may first use the fork in just the same way as the spoon was used; this is assimilation of the new tool to existing skills and knowledge. When the child realises that the prongs of the fork offer new eating opportunities – spiking food rather than just 'spooning' it – accommodation occurs; the child's actions and knowledge adapt to the new possibility and something new is created. These two adaptive processes, although essentially different, happen together. Assimilation and accommodation are initially adaptive processes of behaviour, but they become processes of thinking. Accommodation is an important idea that has been taken into second language learning under the label 'restructuring', used to refer to the re-organisation of mental representations of a language (McLaughlin 1992). We will encounter it again when we consider the development of grammar.

From a Piagetian viewpoint, a child's thinking develops as gradual growth of knowledge and intellectual skills towards a final stage of formal, logical thinking. However, gradual growth is punctuated with certain fundamental changes, which cause the child to pass through a series of stages. At each stage, the child is capable of some types of thinking but still incapable of others. In particular, the Piagetian end-point of development – thinking that can manipulate formal abstract categories using rules of logic – is held to be unavailable to children before they reach 11 years of age or more.

The experimental studies used to support Piaget's theories have been criticised for not being sufficiently child-friendly, and for underestimating what children are capable of. In a series of ingenious experiments, Margaret Donaldson and her colleagues have convincingly

shown that when appropriate language, objects and tasks are used, very young children are capable of many of the ways of thinking that Piaget held too advanced for them, including formal, logical thought (Donaldson 1978). These results undermine some of Piaget's theoretical views, particularly the notion of discrete stages and the idea that children cannot do certain things if they have not yet 'reached' that stage. An example of how stage theory can lead to restricting children's learning occurred in the UK in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Before children were allowed to start writing sentences, they had to complete sets of 'writing readiness' activities that worked on part-skills. In spending so long on writing patterns and bits of letter shapes, they were missing out on the more holistic experiences that also help children understand the purposes of writing as communication.

An important dimension of children's lives that Piaget neglects is the *social*; it is the child on his or her own in the world that concerns him, rather than the child in communication with adults and other children. As we will see, Vygotsky's ideas give a much greater priority to social interaction.

1.2.2 Implications of Piagetian theory for language learning

The child as sense-maker

We can take from Piaget the very important idea of the child as an active learner and thinker, constructing his or her own knowledge from working with objects or ideas. Donaldson's work emphasises that

> (the child) *actively tries to make sense of the world* . . . asks questions, . . . wants to know . . . Also from a very early stage, the child has *purposes and intentions*: he wants *to do*. (Donaldson 1978: 86, my emphasis)

Children also seek out intentions and purposes in what they see other people doing, bringing their knowledge and experience to their attempts to make sense of other people's actions and language. Realising that children are active '*sense-makers*', but that their sense-making is limited by their experience, is a key to understanding how they respond to tasks and activities in the language classroom that we will use throughout this book.

The world as offering opportunities for learning

If we take Piaget's idea that children adapt through experiences with objects in their environment, and turn it around, we can see how that

environment provides the setting for development through the opportunities it offers the child for action. Transferring this idea metaphorically to the abstract world of learning and ideas, we can think of the classroom and classroom activities as creating and offering opportunities to learners for learning. This view coincides with 'ecological' thinking that sees events and activities as offering *affordances* or opportunities for use and interaction that depend on who is involved (Gibson 1979): for example, to a human being, a tree 'affords' shelter from the rain or firewood, to a bird, the same tree 'affords' a nest site or buds to eat.

1.3 Vygotsky

1.3.1 The child as social

Vygotsky's views of development differ from Piaget's in the importance he gives to language and to other people in the child's world. Although Vygotsky's theory is currently most noted for his central focus on the social, and modern developments are often labelled 'sociocultural theory', he did not neglect the individual or individual cognitive development. The development of the child's first language in the second year of life is held to generate a fundamental shift in cognitive development. Language provides the child with a new tool, opens up new opportunities for doing things and for organising information through the use of words as symbols. Young children can often be heard talking to themselves and organising themselves as they carry out tasks or play, in what is called private speech. As children get older they speak less and less aloud, and differentiate between social speech for others and 'inner speech', which continues to play an important role in regulating and controlling behaviour (Wertsch 1985). Adults sometimes resort to speaking aloud when faced with a tricky task, like finding the way to an unfamiliar place, verbalising to help themselves think and recall: *Turn left then right at the roundabout . . .*

In considering the early speech of infants and its development into language, Vygotsky (1962) distinguishes the outward talk and what is happening in the child's mind. The infant begins with using single words, but these words convey whole messages: when a child says *juice*, s/he may mean *I want some more juice* or *my juice has spilt*. As the child's language develops, the whole undivided thought message can be broken down into smaller units and expressed by putting together words that are now units of talk.

Underlying Vygotskyan theory is the central observation that

development and learning take place in a social context, i.e. in a world full of other people, who interact with the child from birth onwards. Whereas for Piaget the child is an active learner alone in a world of objects, for Vygotsky the child is an active learner in a world full of other people. Those people play important roles in helping children to learn, bringing objects and ideas to their attention, talking while playing and about playing, reading stories, asking questions. In a whole range of ways, adults *mediate* the world for children and make it accessible to them. The ability to learn through instruction and mediation is characteristic of human intelligence. With the help of adults, children can do and understand much more than they can on their own. To illustrate this idea, let's return to the example of the baby learning to feed herself with a spoon. At some point in learning to use a spoon to eat with, the baby may be able to get the spoon in the food and can put a spoonful of food in her mouth, but cannot quite manage the middle step of filling the spoon with food. A helpful adult may assist the baby with the difficult part by putting his hand over the baby's and guiding it in filling the spoon. In this way, adult and child together achieve what the baby was unable to do by herself, and the baby receives some useful training in turning the spoon at the angle needed to get hold of the food. Before long the baby will master this step and can be left to do the whole feeding process by herself. The adult could have helped the baby in many different ways, including just doing it all to save time and mess! The kind of spoon-filling help, targeted at what the baby can nearly but not quite do herself, is seen as particularly useful in promoting development; filling the spoon with food was an action in the baby's *zone of proximal development* (or ZPD). We can note before we leave this example that parents are often very 'tuned-in' to their own children and know exactly what help is needed next, and that skilful teachers also manage to do this in a class of thirty or more different ZPDs.

Vygotsky used the idea of the ZPD to give a new meaning to 'intelligence'. Rather than measuring intelligence by what a child can do alone, Vygotsky suggested that intelligence was better measured by what a child can do with skilled help. Different children at the same point in development will make different uses of the same help from an adult. Take as an example seven or eight year olds learning to do arithmetic and perhaps meeting subtraction problems for the first time. For some pupils, a demonstration by the teacher using counting bricks may be all they need to grasp the idea and do other sums of the same type. Others will be able to do the same sum again but not be able to generalise to other sums. In foreign language learning, we might imagine children listening to the teacher model a new question: *Do you like swimming?* and being encouraged to ask similar questions. One

child may be able to use other phrases he has learnt previously and say *Do you like drinking orange juice?* whereas another may be able to repeat *Do you like swimming?* and yet another would have trouble repeating it accurately. In each case, the ZPD, or what the child can do with the help of the adult is different; this, Vygotsky suggested, is a more useful measure of intelligence or ability.

Learning to do things and learning to think are both helped by interacting with an adult. Vygotsky saw the child as first doing things in a social context, with other people and language helping in various ways, and gradually shifting away from reliance on others to independent action and thinking. This shift from thinking aloud and talking through what is being done, to thinking inside the head, is called *internalisation*. Wertsch (1985) emphasises that internalisation for Vygotsky was not just a transfer but also a transformation; being able to think about something is qualitatively different from being able to do it. In the internalising process, the *interpersonal*, joint talk and joint activity, later becomes *intrapersonal*, mental action by one individual.

1.3.2 Implications of Vygotskyan theory for language learning

Words and meanings

The importance of the *word* as unit has been downplayed by those who have developed Vygotsky's theories (e.g. Lantolf 2000). However, I believe that words do have a special significance for children learning a new language. The word is a recognisable linguistic unit for children in their first language and so they will notice words in the new language. Often too we teach children words in the new language by showing them objects that they can see and touch, and that have single word labels in the first language. From their earliest lessons, children are encouraged to think of the new language as a set of words, although of course this may not be the only way they think of it.

The importance of the word as unit is underscored by recent research into word frequency and use undertaken by corpus linguists, and the discovery that much of our knowledge of our first language can be accounted for by the information we build up over time about statistical probabilities of which words are used with which other words.

The zone of proximal development

Many of Vygotsky's ideas will help in constructing a theoretical framework for teaching foreign languages to children. In deciding what a

teacher can do to support learning, we can use the idea that the adult tries to mediate *what next it is the child can learn*; this has applications in both lesson planning and in how teachers talk to pupils minute by minute. In the next chapter I develop a framework for analysing classroom tasks that incorporates the notion of the ZPD. We can look at stages in tasks for how well they help a child to move in language skills from the interpersonal to the intrapersonal.

Learning as internalisation

The concept of internalisation will be used in later chapters to understand learning processes in the foreign language. The new language is first used meaningfully by teacher and pupils, and later it is transformed and internalised to become part of the individual child's language skills or knowledge

1.4 Bruner

1.4.1 Scaffolding and routines

For Bruner, language is the most important tool for cognitive growth, and he has investigated how adults use language to mediate the world for children and help them to solve problems (Bruner 1983, 1990). Talk that supports a child in carrying out an activity, as a kind of verbal version of the fine-tuned help given in the baby feeding example above, has been labelled *scaffolding* (Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976). In experiments with American mothers and children, parents who scaffolded tasks effectively for children did the following:

- they made the children interested in the task;
- they simplified the task, often by breaking it down into smaller steps;
- they kept the child on track towards completing the task by reminding the child of what the goal was;
- they pointed out what was important to do or showed the child other ways of doing parts of the tasks;
- they controlled the child's frustration during the task;
- they demonstrated an idealised version of the task.

Moreover, good scaffolding was tuned to the needs of the child and adjusted as the child became more competent. Scaffolding has been transferred to the classroom and teacher–pupil talk. Wood (1998) suggests that teachers can scaffold children's learning in various ways:

Table 1.1

Teachers can help children to	***By***
attend to what is relevant	suggesting
	praising the significant
	providing focusing activities
adopt useful strategies	encouraging rehearsal
	being explicit about organisation
remember the whole task and goals	reminding
	modelling
	providing part–whole activities

(from Wood 1998)

Each of these teaching strategies can be applied to language teaching. The notion of *helping children attend to what is important* will recur in various topics, and echoes discussions in English language teaching about 'noticing' (e.g. Schmidt 1990). In directing attention and in remembering the whole task and goals on behalf of the learner, the teacher is doing what children are not yet able to do for themselves. When they focus on some part of a task or the language they want to use, children may not be able to keep in mind the larger task or communicative aim because of limits to their attentional capacity. Between them, teacher and pupils manage the whole task, but the way in which the parts and aspects are divided up varies with age and experience. The teacher does most of the managing of joint engagement on a task.

Bruner has provided a further useful idea for language teaching in his notions of *formats and routines*. These are features of events that allow scaffolding to take place, and combine the security of the familiar with the excitement of the new. Bruner's most useful example of a routine is of parents reading stories to their children from babyhood onwards (see also Garton and Pratt 1998). I will develop it at some length, both because it clarifies the important idea of routines, and also because it will be used in later discussions of the role of stories in language classrooms.

In situations where parents read bedtime stories to their children (Bruner researched middle-class American families), the routine that is followed at the same time each day goes something like this: the child sits on the parent's lap with a large picture story book, and parent and child turn the pages together. As the child gets older, the type of book changes and the roles of adult and child change, but the basic format remains. When action and language use are analysed, another layer of routine emerges. With very young children, adults do most of the talking, describing the characters and objects in the pictures and

involving the child with instructions, tag questions and talk about salient images, such as *Look at the clown. He's got a big nose, hasn't he?* The child can be further involved by being asked to point to known pictures: *Where's the clown? and where's his big nose?* As the child learns to talk, so the child's verbal involvement increases as she or he joins in naming pictures and events. Over any short period of time, the language used by the parent includes a lot of repetition, and uses finely tuned language that the child, helped by the pictures, can make sense of. The book-reading event is scaffolded by the adult to let the child participate at the level he or she is capable of. The repeated language allows the child to predict what is coming and thus to join in, verbally or non-verbally.

At a later stage, when the five or six year old child is beginning to read, the format may be much the same, with the routine and language more advanced. At this stage, the parent may read the story aloud as well as ask questions about the pictures. The child may finish sentences, recalling how the story ends from memory of previous reading events. Later still, the child may read the story to the parent.

Notice how novelty and change are incorporated alongside the familiar security of the routine, and how the child can participate at an increasingly more demanding level as the parent reduces the scaffolding. Again, language use is predictable within the routine, but there is a 'space' within which the child can take over and do the language her/himself. This *space for growth* ideally matches the child's zone of proximal development. Bruner suggests that these routines and their adjustment provide an important site for language and cognitive development.

1.4.2 Routines in the language classroom

Transferring to the language classroom, we can see how classroom routines, which happen every day, may provide opportunities for language development. One immediate example would be in classroom management, such as giving out paper and scissors for making activities. As a routine, this would always take basically the same form: for example, the teacher talking to the whole class, organising distribution, perhaps using children as monitors; the scissors might be kept in a box, the paper in a cupboard. The language used would suit the task and the pupils' level; so early stage learners might hear, *George, please give out the scissors. Margaret, please give out the paper.* The context and the familiarity of the event provide an opportunity for pupils to predict meaning and intention, but the routine also offers a way to add variation and novelty that can involve more complex language: *Sam,*

please ask everybody if they want white paper or black paper, or *Give out a pair of scissors to each group*. As the language becomes more complex, the support to meaning that comes from the routine and the situation helps the children to continue to understand. The increased complexity of language provides a space for language growth; if the new language is within a child's ZPD, she or he will make sense of it and start the process of internalising it.

Routines then can provide opportunities for meaningful language development; they allow the child to actively make sense of new language from familiar experience and provide a space for language growth. Routines will open up many possibilities for developing language skills.

1.5 From learning to language learning

1.5.1 First, second and foreign languages

The first sections of this chapter have reviewed important theories of learning that yield valuable tools for theorising the teaching of languages to young learners. They have been largely concerned with the learning of children in general rather than the learning of language. In the second half of the chapter, I review theory and research that are relevant to the learning of foreign languages by children.

To help us understand the nature of language learning, we can draw on studies of first language acquisition and from North American research into second language development in children. However, the language learning that is studied in these contexts is different in important ways from the learning of a foreign language. When we make use of theory and empirical research from these other situations, we need always to do so with care, extracting what is transferable, and if possible, carrying out research to check that it does transfer.

The central characteristics of *foreign language learning* lie in the *amount and type of exposure* to the language: there will be very little experience of the language outside the classroom, and encounters with the language will be through several hours of teaching in a school week. In the case of a global language like English, however, even very young children will encounter the language in use on video, TV, computers and film. What they might not be exposed to is 'street' use, i.e. people using the language for everyday life purposes all around them, as might happen in a second language immersion context such as learning French or English in Canada, or an additional language context, such as children of Pakistani heritage in England. In foreign language teaching,

there is an onus on the teacher to provide exposure to the language and to provide opportunities for learning through classroom activities.

The cultural 'foreign-ness' of countries in which the language is a national language, e.g. Australia, USA or UK for English; France or Canada for French, may be brought into the learning of the language, or it may be considered irrelevant because the motivation for teaching the language is to use it as a lingua franca between non-native speakers.

1.5.3 Learning the first language

It was thought until quite recently that by the age of 5, first language acquisition was largely complete. We have come to understand that this is not the case. Formal literacy skills are still in the early stages of development at five and six years of age, even though the beginnings of literacy can be traced back to experiences in infancy, such as listening to stories. Some structures in spoken language are acquired late because of their connection with the written language. In English, relative clauses are one example of this: Perera (1984) reports that children of 11 years tend not to use relative clauses beginning with *whose*, or preposition + relative pronoun e.g. *in which*. She suggests that this is because such structures occur mainly in written text and so children have little experience of them in their early years. Children also have problems using words that express logical relations between ideas, like cause and effect. The full use of co-ordinators, including *but* and *yet*, is still to be developed after the age of 11 years, and clauses introduced with *although* or *unless* can cause problems even for 15 year olds. The meanings of these linking terms are logically complicated and correct use requires the child to have developed both logical understanding and the language in which to express it. If young first language children find such aspects of English difficult then there seems little reason for including them on syllabuses for child learners of English as a foreign language, and the same would be true for similar aspects of other languages.

Discourse skills in the first language continue to develop throughout the early school years. At 7 years of age, children are still acquiring the skills needed for extended discourse. In telling narratives, for example, children are still learning how to create thematic structure through language, and are still developing the full range of uses of pronouns and determiners (Karmiloff-Smith 1986; Snow 1996). Given the importance attached in the methodology literature to using stories in foreign language teaching (e.g. Wright 1997), teachers need to remember that children may still be finding it difficult to use pronouns correctly in their first language to control reference to characters across a sequence of

events and plot actions, and not to demand unreasonable skills in the foreign language.

Important work from the USA is showing that first language proficiency does not develop as a single, global phenomenon, but that different domains of language use develop differently (Snow 1996). In a project to investigate the language development of children aged 14–32 months, language was measured across the linguistic domains of phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax, conversation and discourse, and have been shown to be largely independent. Extended discourse seems to develop differently from conversation. Furthermore, a connection has been found between children's early experiences with language use in their families, and their language development in various domains. In families where narratives are told around the dinner table, on topics such as what happened to parents at work or siblings at school, children develop narrative and discourse skills faster; children whose families use a wide vocabulary develop faster in the lexical domain.

One implication for teachers of foreign languages to young children is that children will come into foreign language learning at the earliest stages bringing with them differently developed skills and learning abilities in their first language. By the age of five, individual differences in language domains will be established and so, for example, some children will find it easier to learn vocabulary than others, or children with more developed conversational skills may transfer these to the new language more easily than others. From the same language lesson, it is likely that different children will learn different things, depending partly on what they find easier to learn. In Vygotskyan terms, it seems likely that a second or foreign language ZPD may not be global, but that different aspects of language will have different ZPDs.

1.5.2 Learning a second language

Age and second language learning

It has long been hypothesised that children learn a second language better than adults, and this is often used to support the early introduction of foreign language teaching. The Critical Period Hypothesis is the name given to the idea that young children can learn a second language particularly effectively before puberty because their brains are still able to use the mechanisms that assisted first language acquisition. The Critical Period Hypothesis holds that older learners will learn language differently after this stage and, particularly for accent, can never achieve the same levels of proficiency. While some empirical studies offer support for the Critical Period Hypothesis, other studies provide

evidence that there is no such cut-off point for language learning. Lightbown and Spada (1999) present some of the evidence for and against the Critical Period Hypothesis, and remind us to attend to the different needs, motivations and contexts of different groups of learners. They suggest that where native-like proficiency in a second language is the goal, then learning benefits from an early start, but when the goal is communicative ability in a foreign language, the benefits of an early start are much less clear.

Further support for making this key distinction comes from a recent study into brain activity during language processing (Kim *et al.* 1997). This study discovered that the brain activity patterns of early bilinguals, who learn two languages at the same time from infancy, differ from those of learners who begin learning a language after about 7 or 8 years of age; different parts of the brain are used for language recall and activation. Foreign language learning of the sort we are concerned with is thus an essentially different mental activity from early simultaneous bilingualism and from L1 acquisition.

The influence of the first language on the second

The 'Competition Model' of linguistic performance is a theory that explains how first language learning may affect subsequent second or foreign language development (Bates and MacWhinney 1989). In this model, different languages have different ways of carrying meaning, and the particular ways in which a language encodes meaning act as 'cues' to interpreting the meaning of what is said. For example, word order in English is a very reliable and helpful cue that helps listeners identify Subject and Object, i.e. who is acting and on what. In a sentence like *the cat ate the snake*, the cat and the snake do not have endings that show which is the 'eater' (the agent or Subject of the verb) and which is the eaten (acted-on or Object). It is their position in the sentence, or the word order, that reveals this; we can tell that *the cat* is the Subject and does the eating because it comes before the verb, while *the snake*, which comes after the verb, has to be the Object. Other languages, such as Italian, do not have restrictions on word order in sentences, and so the order of the words does not offer as much information about meaning as in English; word order is a stronger cue in English than in Italian (Liu *et al.* 1992). All levels of language can provide cues, including lexis, morphology (word endings or prefixes) and phonology (the sound system of a language). Sometimes one source of information reinforces another, and sometimes they conflict, or are in competition, in which case the most reliable cue wins out. Studies carried out across different languages have led to the important conclu-

sion that children become sensitive to the reliability of cues in their first language from early infancy (Bates *et al.* 1984). As babies, they learn to pay attention to particular cues which hold useful information for meaning. Later, if faced with trying to understand a second language, they will transfer these first language strategies to make sense of L2 sentences, trying to find information in familiar places. Where two languages make use of very different types of cues, the transfer of strategies from L1 to L2 may not be very fruitful. Learners may need to be helped to notice and pay attention to the salient cues of the new language. In the case of English, word order is most salient, but so too are word endings that show tense (e.g. *walk – ed*) and plurality (*shop – s*) (Slobin 1985).

Age and first language

The cue effect is compounded by an effect of age. In studies of immersion language learning, younger children (7–8 years) seem to pay more attention to sound and prosody (the 'music' of an utterance), whereas older children (12–14 years) are more attentive to cues of word order (Harley *et al.* 1995). Children are generally less able to give selective and prolonged attention to features of learning tasks than adults, and are more easily diverted and distracted by other pupils. When faced with talk in the new language, they try to understand it in terms of the grammar and salient cues of their first language and also pay particular attention to items of L2 vocabulary that they are familiar with (Harley 1994; Schmidt 1990). These findings will not surprise experienced primary teachers, but they give further empirical support to the idea that teachers can help learners by focusing their attention on useful sources of information in the new language, as also suggested by Bruner's scaffolding studies (section 1.4 above). Which cues need explicit attention will vary with the first language of the learners. How to help pupils do this will be considered in more detail in later chapters, but here I present *directing attention* as a key principle with many applications in the young learner classroom.

The competition model of understanding a second language, and empirical findings that support the view that first language experience influences second language use, remind us that in learning a foreign language, students are learning both *the whole and the parts*. In this case, the 'parts' are tiny aspects of grammar or phonology that are crucial in reaching a 'whole' interpretation.

Influence of teaching on second language learning

There is mounting evidence from foreign language learning contexts of the influence of teaching method on what is learnt. The range of language experiences that children get in their foreign language lessons is likely to influence how their language develops; for example, if lessons provide opportunities to participate in question and answer type talk then they will be good at that but not necessarily at other, more extended, types of talk. Mitchell and Martin (1997) document the different teaching styles and beliefs of teachers of French to 11 year old children (English L1), and show how this seems to result in children producing certain types of language rather than others. Weinert (1994) details how 11–13 year old learners of German (English L1) reproduce in their talk the language types used by their teachers.

Further research is needed into the extent of this teaching effect on language learning, and at what levels of specificity it operates (see also Chapter 5). Current knowledge reinforces an intuitively obvious notion: foreign language learners who depend on their teachers and texts for most of their exposure and input, will not, if this is restricted in type, develop across the full range of the foreign language. A particular aspect of this concerns extended discourse, i.e. talking at length, and later, writing at length. If, as seems to be the case from the first language research reported above, conversational skills develop independently of extended discourse skills, then we cannot assume that teaching children conversational language will lead to them being able to speak *at length* in the foreign language, but rather must work on the principle that if we want children to tell stories or recount events, they need to have experience of how this is done in the foreign language. *Modelling* of language use by teachers, already seen as an important step in scaffolding (section 1.4), needs further to be genre-specific.

1.6 Advantages to starting young with foreign languages

Many advantages are claimed for starting to learn a foreign language in the primary years; more evidence is needed to judge how far claims turn into reality. Experience in the UK twenty years ago found that language learning in primary schools was not as positive as expected, although in retrospect this seems likely to be due to how it was implemented and, in particular, to the lack of attention that planners paid to what would happen at secondary level, when FL teachers were faced with mixed classes of beginners and more advanced learners. The social, cultural and political issues around policies of teaching foreign languages early

are complex and influence teaching and learning at classroom level. Comparative studies of different socio-political contexts would be useful in investigating these influences and their impact.

Published data on the outcomes of early language learning come from the North American experience with immersion teaching, where native speakers of English are placed in French-speaking nursery and infant schools, and vice versa (Harley and Swain 1994; Lightbown and Spada 1994; Harley *et al.* 1995). In these contexts, children who have an early start develop and maintain advantages in some, but not all, areas of language skills. Listening comprehension benefits most, with overall better outcomes for an earlier start; pronunciation also benefits in the longer term, but this is restricted to learning language in naturalistic contexts, and will not necessarily apply to school-based learning. Younger children learn the grammar of the L2 more slowly than older learners, so that although they start earlier with language learning they make slower progress, and overall gains are not straightforwardly linked to the time spent learning (Harley *et al.* 1995). Learning a second language through immersion differs from learning a foreign language as a subject lesson several times a week; immersion pupils study school subjects through the second language and thus have more exposure and more experience with the language. However, it is unlikely that the difference in quantity of language learning experience will affect the balance of benefits; in foreign language learning too, receptive skills are likely to remain ahead of productive skills, and grammatical knowledge, which is linked not just to language development but to cognitive development, is likely to develop more slowly for younger children.

1.7 The foreign language: describing the indivisible

In this section, I present a first dissection of the whole that is 'language' into the parts that comprise the content of teaching. In applied linguistics over the last decades, it has been common to divide language into 'the Four Skills': Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, and then to add Grammar, Vocabulary and Phonology to them. This division is not as logical as it may seem and has been challenged (Widdowson 1998). Some syllabuses also deal in Topics, Functions and Notions, describing language in terms of how it is used in communication rather than seeing it as a linguistic system or a set of skills.

Because children who start learning a foreign language very young may encounter nothing but the spoken language for several years, the customary division into the four skills seems somewhat inappropriate, and an alternative division of language has been attempted.

The first cut into the holism of language learning separates literacy skills from the rest, on the basis that learning to read and write in a foreign language presents distinct learning tasks that require teaching. I will argue that teachers need to plan and support literacy skills development informed by specific knowledge and understanding of literacy issues, although of course the learner will, and should, experience literacy development as integrated within spoken language development.

Having separated out literacy skills development from of the totality of the foreign language, what then remains is much wider than Speaking and Listening as perceived in secondary or adult language teaching. For young learners, spoken language is the medium through which the new language is encountered, understood, practised and learnt. Rather than oral skills being simply one aspect of learning language, the spoken form in the young learner classroom acts as the prime source and site of language learning. New language is largely introduced orally, understood orally and aurally, practised and automatised orally. My solution to the problem of how to divide up oral language learning comes from thinking about how children seek out meanings for themselves in language, and to focus on *words* and on *interaction*. For Vygotsky, words label concepts and are an entry point into thinking and networks of meaning. In language teaching terms, the development of words, their meanings and the links between them will be covered under the term Vocabulary.

Interaction will be labelled as Discourse skills, and in Chapter 3, will be further divided to reflect the distinction between conversational exchanges and longer stretches of talk that Snow's work in first language development has identified. Instead of thinking about children as 'doing Listening and Speaking', we will think about how they learn to interact in the foreign language. Classroom activities can also be seen and analysed as discourse in their own right.

Grammar will be seen as emerging from the space between words and discourse in children's language learning, and as being important in constructing and interpreting meaning accurately. The development of phonology is not considered separately in this book, since children seem to develop native-like accents without specific training through exposure to good models; it will, however, link into the development of spelling and rhyme (Chapter 6).

The organisational scheme for language is summarised in Figure 1.1. The carving up of language learning in this way seems to reflect reasonably well the real experience of young learners, and the structure of some, at least, of the course books written for them.

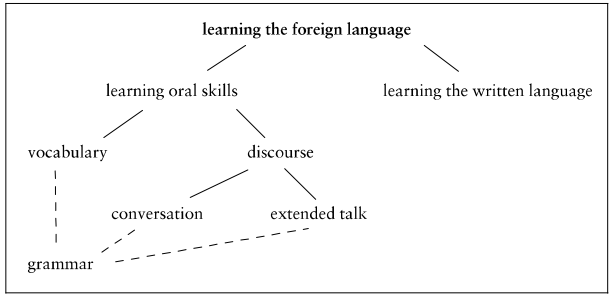

Figure 1.1 Dividing up 'language' for child foreign language learning

This division is, though, and can only ever be, an artificial breaking up of what grows through an 'organic' process in a child's mind. This is one reason why it is not always possible to predict what will be learnt from what is taught, and why attending to the *opportunities* offered by activities will be important.

1.8 Summary of key learning principles

The chapter concludes with a summary of the principles that have emerged as most important in thinking about young children learning a foreign language. Each of these will be used throughout the rest of the book as we consider concrete examples of what students are asked to do in lessons.

Children actively try to construct meaning

Children actively try to 'make sense', i.e. to find and construct a meaning and purpose for what adults say to them and ask them to do. They can only make sense in terms of their world knowledge, which is limited and partial. Teachers thus need to examine classroom activities from the child's point of view in order to assess whether pupils will understand what to do or will be able to make sense of new language.

Children need space for language growth

In both language and cognitive development, the ZPD or immediate potential of the child is of central importance for effective learning. Routines and scaffolding are two types of language-using strategies that seem to be especially helpful in making space for children's growth.

Language in use carries cues to meaning that may not be noticed

Children need skilled help in noticing and attending to aspects of the foreign language that carry meaning. Since they cannot benefit much from formal grammar, other ways of doing this have to be found.

Development can be seen as internalising from social interaction

Language can grow as the child takes over control of language used initially with other children and adults.

Children's foreign language learning depends on what they experience

There are important links between what and how children are taught, and what they learn. Within the ZPD, the broader and richer the language experience that is provided for children, the more they are likely to learn. Foreign language lessons often provide all or most of a child's experience of the language in use; if we want children to develop certain language skills, we need to ensure they have experiences in lessons that will build those skills.

The activities that happen in classrooms create a kind of 'environment' for learning and, as such, offer different kinds of opportunities for language learning. Part of teaching skill is to identify the particular opportunities of a task or activity, and then to develop them into learning experiences for the children. In the next chapter, the idea of identifying the language learning opportunities offered by classroom tasks is developed further.