

From Memorization to Communication: Reconsidering the Point of Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the gap between traditional language instruction methods and natural language acquisition, drawing on the author's experiences as both a language teacher and student as well as a parent. While language instruction often emphasizes rote memorization of vocabulary and grammar through tests, natural language acquisition, as seen in children, involves trial and error, active communication, and gradual improvement. The article advocates for more practical, communicative approaches to language learning, emphasizing teacher-student interactions and creative use of engaging, contextual materials to foster language use in the classroom. The focus is shifted from achieving high test scores to developing functional language skills, arguing that the true measure of success is a student's ability to communicate effectively in the target language.

As both a language teacher and student, I have observed a consistent approach to language instruction over the past twenty-five years in my studies of ancient Greek, Mandarin Chinese, and in my role as an English instructor. The predominant focus has been on vocabulary acquisition through rote memorization and the development of grammatical knowledge, often measured through formative and summative assessments like quizzes and tests. The formative assessments are intended to check how far the student has progressed in grasping the course content at hand. The summative exams will evaluate the sum total of content learned since the start of the course. I frequently pass classrooms where the teacher reads an English word, and students dutifully repeat it in unison. In ancient Greek, students were administered a daily quiz to test the grammatical structures taught in the previous class period. At the end of my Mandarin Chinese course, I was given a final exam to assess how much I had learned throughout the term.

As a father of four sons, I couldn't help but notice the disconnect between how my students and I learned a new language and how humans naturally acquire their mother tongue. Each of my boys began by mimicking the speech of the adults and children around them. What started as isolated words gradually developed into short phrases and complete sentences. At first, their sentences were often grammatically incorrect—the most obvious examples

being their struggles with irregular verbs. Inevitably, each of my sons assumed that the past tense of "go" was "goed" and "run" was "runned." Each time that my wife or I hear our young son say something like, "He hitted my toy bear in the head with the sock!" We try to address the grammatical issue together with the sibling troubles all at once. Over time, through repeated failed attempts to communicate effectively and through consistent correction from siblings and parents, their vocabulary and grasp of grammatical structures improved dramatically.

There is a significant difference between learning English in a multicultural classroom and a monocultural one. Given the choice, I would prefer students learn a new language in a multicultural setting. In a monocultural classroom, students tend to revert to their shared native language during discussions, making it easier to communicate but hindering their progress in the new language. For example, in a classroom full of Chinese speakers, it's much simpler to speak in Chinese than to make the effort to communicate in English. While using the majority language may feel more comfortable, it ultimately limits their language development. Monocultural environments tend to discourage meaningful advancement in the target language.

I had a class with Spanish, Chinese, Russian, and Mongolian students all studying English together. The inability to communicate pressured the students to speak even at the most basic level possible. A question asked by the Mongolian left the Russian classmate longing to understand what information she was seeking to gain from him. People naturally rally around a commonality. Typically, ethnicity is the point that most people associate around, however, this can include things like social status, sports teams, fashion, or foods. When a group of students are put together with no historical or cultural relation, they will look for something to connect one another. The most obvious characteristic is their shared study of English.

If I may return to the family dynamic for a moment, it is the need for survival that drives a child to advance their language skills. For instance, in order for my son to protect his belongings from his brothers, he had to learn how to clearly express disapproval of their borrowing his things and firmly assert ownership of his possessions. When hunger pains struck, only by effectively communicating his need could he ensure that his cravings would be satisfied. The child is driven forward in his language learning by his need to be understood by others and understand the situations surrounding him.

When a class is composed of students from diverse cultural backgrounds and languages, it creates an ideal environment for English advancement. Students naturally gravitate toward building relationships, and when placed in a room with classmates they can only connect with through a shared goal of learning a new language, there is a powerful survivalist incentive to make progress. If a student fails to learn the new language, their classmates remain strangers, and feelings of an outsider set in. By acquiring another language, students not only improve their communication skills but also learn about each other's cultures, share their life stories, and form lasting friendships.

To avoid oversimplifying, a multicultural classroom does not automatically guarantee an environment conducive to practicing the target language. For example, I once took a Mandarin Chinese course with international classmates from diverse cultures. While this setting should have been ideal for learning Mandarin, it didn't quite turn out that way. The

reason for this was that, despite speaking six different native languages, all the students shared a functional level of English. As a result, although participants were there to learn Mandarin, reliance was on English to communicate and understand the lessons. While this sped up classroom interactions, it did little to improve our Mandarin proficiency. True progress occurs when students are compelled to communicate exclusively in the new language.

While multicultural classes are preferable, they are not always feasible. A monocultural classroom presents certain challenges, as students will often, almost instinctively, revert to their shared native language to try and understand the new language. They may even ask the instructor to explain concepts in their first language, believing it will aid their comprehension. However, this approach is not in their best interest for language acquisition. I've heard many instructors advocate for an English-only classroom, where students are required to speak English during the class period. While this may be an ideal goal, it is often difficult to achieve. Instructors rarely have full control over what language students choose to speak among themselves, but they do have complete control over which language they use when addressing their students. While multicultural classrooms foster an ideal language-learning environment, this is only true when they encourage communication in the target language. Monocultural classrooms may be less conducive to this, but they do not make it impossible.

When a teacher responds to students' questions using only English, it forces students to actively listen and engage with the language, even in its unfamiliarity. One of my students, C.M., once shared that "pure English teaching can simulate an English context and explain English in English." In contrast, when I observe a typical ESL class, especially those where the teacher and students share the same native language, most of the instruction occurs in the students' mother tongue. However, in an English-only classroom, students are encouraged to respond in the target language. If they don't fully understand the teacher's message, it can be rephrased or simplified gradually, helping them build comprehension over time.

Similarly, a teacher's expectations for a student's response should be tailored to the student's proficiency level. The classroom environment should naturally revolve around the active use of the language. Even if a student's understanding and speaking skills are basic, their ability to engage in English represents a success and a step forward. Ultimately, the goal of English instructors is to foster an environment where communication flows in English, enabling both the teacher to be heard by, and to hear from, their students in the target language.

This approach places the greatest workload on the English teacher in the classroom. If students are attentive, the teacher can move from table to table, asking a question and receiving various answers organically. In the case of less attentive students, the teacher will ask direct questions, ensuring each student responds during the class period. While this approach may feel time-consuming for larger classes, it offers several key benefits. I asked some students to tell me what thoughts came to their minds about my teaching method and they confirmed the following as shown in their comments.

First, this approach ensures that each student receives personalized attention from the teacher. By the end of the semester, every student will have engaged in multiple one-on-one interactions. As C.M. shared, "This is not so much a course as an exchange meeting where everyone shares their ideas." T.J. echoed this sentiment, noting, "It can also make the participation level higher and the classroom atmosphere more pleasant." Second, no student will leave the course without having made an effort to communicate in English. Even the most reluctant students, who might try to avoid conversation, will have the opportunity to demonstrate at least a basic level of comprehension and provide simple responses. For students who struggle, it's important to remember that the goal is practice, not perfection. L.K. appreciated this approach, saying, "Every time I don't understand, you will explain it clearly. If I still don't understand, it will be broken down into simple and easy-to-understand words."

Finally, this method allows the teacher to build a personal connection, however small, with each student. These connections can significantly impact students' perceptions of the course, as they feel seen, supported, and encouraged in their language-learning journey. T.J. appreciated the "teacher-student interaction" that characterized the course. This is one of the aspects I, as an educator, enjoy most about teaching English—the opportunity for genuine exchange. The structure of a language course naturally lends itself to a question-and-answer format, which can serve as a gateway to building relationships. Everyone enjoys sharing their own cultural experiences with someone from a different background. As a teacher, I have the privilege of discussing not only cultural topics but also personal matters, such as family, career aspirations, and hobbies. Each class becomes an opportunity to connect more deeply with students, both as an instructor and as a friend.

The most effective way to encourage language use in a monocultural setting is through direct teacher-student interaction. Teachers can enhance this communication by using creative strategies that promote active engagement. When a child is young and illiterate, they cannot rely on reading signs, packages, and documents to learn the names and pronunciation of items. Instead, they typically see an object, ask about it, or overhear its name in conversation, and then add it to their vocabulary. Expanding vocabulary is essentially a continuous game of word association. For example, a child eats an apple, enjoys the taste, and wants to know its name so they can ask for it again in the future. A child observes something new and starts a conversation based on what they've just witnessed.

Similarly, most students today are visual learners. To effectively encourage English use in the classroom, the learning environment must actively foster it. Simply asking students to speak isn't enough; they need engaging material to discuss. Short animation videos, especially those without dialogue, can serve as powerful tools to spark conversation and provide context for practicing new grammar. For example, an animation depicting a character facing various challenges can prompt discussions around problem-solving vocabulary and grammatical structures. Another video showing multiple actions unfolding simultaneously can help students practice narrative tenses as they retell events in sequence. Travel vlogs can introduce topics related to travel, food reviews can inspire discussions about eating habits, and sports challenges can open conversations about hobbies. As English student W.Y. noted, "The video, PPT, photographs, and so on, are all interesting and promote socialization. Extra meaning is opened before our eyes. In a word, their brief

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task is improving our oral English skills.” The goal isn’t entertainment—it’s meaningful language practice.

This teaching method may not guarantee improved rote memorization or higher test scores, but it will encourage students to actively use the language they came to learn. While it may be challenging for the instructor to implement, it can foster a stronger bond between teacher and students. Although not every instructor is fortunate enough to have a multicultural, multilingual classroom, every class is a challenge, an opportunity, for putting a new language into practice. Language is primarily acquired through practice, and while a higher level of speaking is the ultimate goal, it should not always be the immediate focus.

I’ve noticed that most English course materials tend to follow a fairly standard structure. In a typical teaching unit, there are exercises focused on grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The variety is great for the teacher to use to his or her teaching method’s advantage. Personally, I like to begin each unit with a brief introduction to the main topic, often using discussion questions from the textbook—specifically, I prefer the materials from American Language Hub. I then supplement this introduction with a 5-minute video related to the topic, which serves to stimulate further conversation and enhance oral interaction between myself and the students.

When introducing a grammar exercise, I provide a brief explanation of the grammatical structure, but I focus the majority of my time on practicing its application. If the exercise involves a grammatical structure that requires guessing or predicting, I pause a 5-minute supplemental animation periodically to allow students to share their thoughts using the target sentence structures. For other grammatical forms, I play the video in its entirety, then replay specific segments to guide the class in describing what they saw, using the day’s course content.

My frustration with traditional language learning methods, which emphasized writing, rote memorization, and formal testing, drove me to search for an alternative approach for my students. I suspected I wasn’t alone in noticing the disconnect between the informal way we naturally acquire our mother tongue and the rigid methods typically used in language teaching. That’s when I came across Lambert Sauveur, a 19th-century French teacher who emigrated to the USA and taught entirely through in-class conversation (Ruyffelaert, 2020).

In his book *Introduction to the Teaching of Living Languages without Grammar or Dictionary*, Sauveur explains, “Like my lessons, it teaches the language without grammar or dictionary; like them also, it speaks French from the first hour, and does not pronounce one word of English.” (1875: 4) Regarding the use of written texts, Sauveur advises teachers, “Experience has taught me that all books should be withheld from the pupils for at least a month; that is to say, until the ear is accustomed to the sounds of the language. When they shall have talked with you for this length of time, without a word of English having been pronounced, you will be able with advantage to have them open the book in your classes.” (1875: 26) Sauveur also recognized the importance of the relational aspect of the classroom when

you [the teacher] will continue to examine every thing, to discuss every thing with the pupils, to bring out around you a thousand new thoughts; and you will find yourself, do not doubt it, as rich as you formerly were poor, and as

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interested and full of life as you were wearied and indifferent over your grammars and books, which have either soul nor ideas. Neither you nor your pupils will be impatient for the end of the hour; it will take you by surprise and the time will be always too short. (1875: 27)

The classroom should be a space dedicated to meaningful discussion, and Sauveur believed this was the ideal opportunity for language to fulfill its original purpose: communication. He advises fellow teachers, "I recommend also to my brother teachers to ask only earnest questions, which will render the class attentive and interested: nothing is more contemptible or more fruitless than phrases which are only phrases. They are even powerless to teach words." (Sauveur, 1875: 27) For Sauveur, the French classroom was primarily a place for speaking French, centered around dynamic discussions between the teacher and the student.

Maximilian Berlitz, a teacher of both French and German, found himself in a unique situation when he needed to take sick leave from teaching English-speaking students French. He asked his French assistant, who spoke no English, to step in and do his best in his absence. When Berlitz returned to the classroom, he was surprised to find that his students had made significant progress in their French learning. They had replaced English with gestures to understand unknown words and concepts (Wiacek, 2024).

In a book published by the Berlitz Schools of Language, their teaching method is defended with the following statement: "You acquired English naturally. Not through the memorization of long lists of vocabulary, not through the tedious chore of learning bare-bones grammar—but through actually speaking it" (Berlitz, 1987). Building on this understanding of language acquisition, the method emphasizes oral exercises, practical pronunciation, and activities designed to encourage learners to think directly in the new language. Students are encouraged to study collaboratively and engage in French conversations using a question-and-answer format based on topics provided in the text. The practical pronunciation system, developed by the Berlitz Schools, uses a phonetic approach to help native English speakers master sounds that are particularly challenging for them. For example, the book addresses nasal tones in the following way:

NASALS: Our phonetics for the nasals are arbitrary and purely suggestive. Practice them now, being careful to keep your mouth open and your tongue motionless. Then:

for AWNG—try to say AHN as in English;

for AHNG—try to say AN as in English;

for OHNG—try to say OWN as in English;

for UHNG—try to say UN as in English.

Each language group encounters particular pronunciation challenges in a target language due to the influence of their native language. For example, as a Russian or Spanish speaker, I find it particularly difficult to roll my "R" sound. Similarly, mastering the "ǔ" sound in Mandarin Chinese took considerable time, and after a class focused on this vowel, my

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mouth ached from the new muscles I had to engage to produce the sound correctly. Overcoming these pronunciation challenges requires persistent practice and frequent correction from a native speaker.

Currently, my five-year-old son struggles with the “th” sound in English. For instance, when he tries to say the word three, he naturally pronounces it as free. Each time this happens, my wife and I pause to correct him, guiding him on the correct tongue placement and mouth shape needed for the “th” sound. It’s a challenge and a process for him, just as it is for anyone learning a language for the first time, regardless of age.

The ability to read and translate a French text is not sufficient in the Berlitz method of language learning. Instead, “You master French only in the degree to which you can express your ideas in it. The ability to interpret the thoughts of others is one the first step” (Ibid.). “In a word, you learn to speak a language by speaking it—and in no other way” (Berlitz Schools of Language, p. v). If a student fails to speak aloud, both in public and during private study, they miss the core purpose of not only learning French but of learning language in general. The Berlitz Language School is a place where the target language is spoken exclusively in the classroom, starting from the first day (Wepman, 2012).

The final founder of Direct Method education is James Worman. His book, *First Spanish Book*, touted that it taught “the Spanish language without the held of the learner’s vernacular. Additionally, to the point I made of creating a classroom environment that aids the student to speak in the target language, Worman’s book also “bases linguistic instruction upon a direct appeal to a pictorial illustration of the object mentioned. In no instance is the student left to guess at what is said. He is clearly instructed and speaks always understandingly.” (Worman & Monsanto, 1884: v) Furthermore, “the rules are deduced from the examples; the purpose being to develop the abstract from the concrete. In short, the laws of the language are the learner’s own inferences from the examples.”

In addition to the encouraged input of the learner, Worman tried to motivate the student to keep learning by simplifying the course content being consumed. “Everything is taught by contrast and association. But too frequently in teaching, the learner’s memory is overtaxed and the development of his sense and reasoning faculties neglected. My aim is to employ, first of all, the lower or sense faculties of the mind, the perceptions. It has been wisely said: ‘True perceptions lead to true conceptions, and true conceptions are the very foundations of Truth itself.’” (Worman & Monsanto, 1884, p. vi) The drive behind Worman was not to have a language student overwhelmed with content in order to recount it for an examination, but to “supply the learner with a stock of Spanish words and idioms needed in the every-day affairs of life.”

In recent years, popular tech-based language learning platforms, such as Duolingo, seem to be adopting a more direct method of teaching. This shift is unsurprising, as many tech applications prioritize practicality and functionality. Additionally, in today’s fast-paced world, people often seek quicker results in all areas of life, and when it comes to language learning, the immediate ability to use what’s taught is typically the most desired outcome.

“Duolingo takes a functional approach by focusing on what learners actually want to do with a language. Lessons focus on a real-life goal—for instance, ordering at a restaurant.

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Learners develop the vocabulary and grammar needed to achieve that goal through lots of varied practice.” Duolingo emphasizes practical language use and real-life application.

The lesson structure is centered around images and the target language, which not only makes it accessible to a broader audience (beyond English-speaking users) but also supports the direct method approach. Duolingo also encourages learners to speak aloud in the target language using voice recognition technology. Additionally, listening skills are cultivated through recordings by native speakers.

“Duolingo allows learners to discover patterns on their own without needing to focus on language rules—the same way you learned your first language as a child.” This approach is straight from Sauveur’s handbook, operating on the belief that language rules are best acquired through practice and a trial-and-error process of linguistic development.

As a father, I never used written tests to assess my boys' English proficiency. Their first test came in a formal school setting, after six years of daily language practice in real-world situations. By then, they were already well on their way to becoming fluent English speakers. As parents, our goal was never to prioritize high test scores during those years of significant language development. Instead, we focused on practical language use in daily life. T.J., my English student, captured this dynamic perfectly: “I prefer the type of teacher-student interaction. It feels more in line with the development of oral expression ability.” In language learning, the true measure of success is whether students can speak the language—and that, in itself, is a major linguistic achievement.

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