

From classroom noise to the language of learning

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Over the past few years, I have noticed that lower-level students often fall into two broad categories: beginners with minimal exposure to English and beginners who have had significant past exposure, but were unable to take that input and turn it into intake. When I use the term input, I am referring to all language to which a learner is exposed, either in or out of class. Intake, as a term, is a bit more difficult to get a handle on, but here I'm using Kachru and Smith's (2008) definition in which intake is a subset of input "that has been fully or partially processed by learners, and fully or partially assimilated into their developing L[inter] L[anguage system]" (p. 28).

This is somewhat vague, so let me give a concrete example. I have one student, let's call him Akun, who attended middle school classes regularly, passed his English exams (although was by no means a stand out student), has a working vocabulary of roughly 300 words, and struggles to put together even the most basic sentence when engaging in communicative activities. I have another student, let's call her Bibi, who, due to personal issues, was able to attend middle school only sporadically and functions basically at the same level as Akun. They are both beginners and both need exposure to the same level of English input. Although Akun pays attention in lessons and strives to participate in class activities, he continues to show extremely slow progress when it comes to developing his interlanguage system. Bibi, on the other hand, shows the kind of sharp gains that is typical of a beginner language student.

In general, I find that students like Akun often lack general study skills, such as how to take effective class notes or setting aside time to regularly review what they have learned in class. In addition, these students have relatively few learning strategies, or "specific actions behaviors, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their own progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language" (Oxford, 1999, p. 518) in their learner's toolkit. So the time they do spend studying is relatively ineffective and often leads to a growing sense of frustration. Fortunately, there are a number of short activities which can help identify whether the lack of study skills and/or learning strategies is hindering a student's language development, while at the same time continuing to provide opportunities for more effective learners to keep studying:

1. One-word inference: This is an activity to gauge if students can utilize inference when coming across a new word in a text. It is important that the text itself is complete and does not overly rely on students'

background knowledge. Here is an example of a text I wrote for my first year students:

I lived on a small island near Okinawa for three years. To go from my own island to the nearest (1 番近い) island, I took a small boat with only one **sail**. Even though it only had one sail, when the wind was strong, the boat moved very quickly.

Most of the students know all of the words in the paragraph, but they do not know 'sail' and might also not know 'nearest'. In order to keep the activity as simple as possible, I supply the meaning of 'nearest,' in the L1. I ask the students to read the paragraph and write down the meaning of the word in bold. For Akun, to whom an unknown word was a brick wall in a middle of a text, the first thing he would do during this activity is reach for his dictionary. Once I knew that inferring was an issue with Akun, I gave him short paragraphs like the one above twice a week to help him develop inferring skills. Within three weeks of beginning the training, he was comfortable enough to guess the meaning of a word and only referred to his dictionary to check his answer.

2. Dictionary race: I give the students a list of five sentences, each one containing a high frequency word in bold that a majority of students do not know. For example, "My brother **applied** to Tokyo University in April." When selecting words and preparing sample sentences, it is important to select the kinds of words with multiple meanings that are most difficult for learners with little or no experience using a dictionary. Students then look up the word in bold, identify the sample sentence most similar to the given sentence, and copy the sample sentence down on their worksheet. Students who do not know how to use a dictionary will often copy down a sample sentence for a different meaning. In Akun's case, he would even occasionally write out a definition instead of a sample sentence. Once I know which students are having problems using a dictionary, I can hold a special lesson on dictionary use for them after school. As an added bonus, students who are already comfortable using a dictionary get exposure to a set of high frequency words and can incrementally decrease the time it takes them to look up each word.

3. Word-use report: All my students keep a vocabulary notebook and are required to add at least 25 high frequency words to it each week. Unfortunately, for some of my students, adding words to the notebook is all they do. The vocabulary notebook ends up being just so many pages of words, a graveyard of nouns, verbs, and adjectives slowly fading from memory. So for the first month or so of class, I have students keep a tally of the number of times that they come

across the words on their list in or out of class during a week. All they have to do is draw a hashmark next to the word in their notebook each time they encounter it. This helps me identify students who have yet to figure out the importance of looking for chances to take note of and reinforce language learned in the classroom. Students whose vocabulary notebook is littered with hashmarks are good to go. Those who do not have many (or in some cases any) hashmarks get a bit of one-on-one time to practice on noticing their developing vocabulary when working with spoken or written texts.

4. Note rewriting time and (very) short tests: If I do a guided discovery activity in class, for example uses of 'have' versus 'there is/are', I make sure to give the students a few minutes to rewrite their class notes at the end of the activity. In the next lesson I give a very short test during which time students can use their class notes. When grading the short test, I make sure to compare students' answers with their rewritten class notes. Many of my students have limited classroom experience, and although they often understand the language point explored in class, they do not know how to put this knowledge into a form which is useful for later studying. When I give the test results back, I can go over their answers and their notes and help them notice aspects of the language that they might have understood in class but failed to write down coherently in their notebook.

5. Free talk using class notes and translation assistance: This is a 10-minute free speaking activity broken down into two sections. During the activity, students are free to use their vocabulary notebooks and each student also has a pad of Post-It Notes. If they want to say something but do not know how, they can write what they want to say in their L1 on the Post-It Note and hand it to me. I write out a translation in English and give the Post-It Note back to the students. During the first five minutes of the activity, students talk in pairs. The second five minutes, the students talk as a class. During this time, I can see if students are trying to use the language that they have been working with in class. Bibi-type students will often use and recycle classroom language and make a concerted effort to use language they learned in the pair work again in the all-class discussion. They also diligently copy their Post-It Note translations into their vocabulary notebooks. Akun-type students rarely recycle language from the first part of the activity and often hand me Post-It Notes with the same phrases two or three times over the course of a week. When this happens, I gently nudge these students to just keep the Post-It Notes in their vocabulary notebooks. Once they see the value of holding onto the

Post-It Notes, I then ask them to take the additional time and write out the sentences or phrases in their vocabulary notebooks. Now when we do this activity, there are moments when Akun starts to write something on his Post-It Note, stops, and flips open his vocabulary notebook. Each time he uses the vocabulary notebook he takes one more step towards being an independent learner.

6. 10 loan words: This is a variation on an activity I picked up from Ur and Wright's *Five-Minute Activities* (1992). I use it to gauge how well lower-level learners are utilizing their limited language resources. First, I have each student think of 10 English loan words in their L1. They then form pairs and together check off any of the words on their lists which they think would be understandable if used as is in an English conversation. Finally, they consult a dictionary to see which of their guesses were correct. While there are a number of false friend loan words, or words whose meaning differ significantly in Japanese and English, many of the English loan words are readily understandable in conversation. This activity not only helps students quickly build up their vocabulary, but also shows them that they know much more English than they think they do and provides them with an incentive to explore using loan words during communicative activities.

Two years ago, I attended a keynote address by Paul Nation in which he identified a teacher's main jobs. Teaching language was ranked fifth out of the five things a teacher needed to do, two steps behind "to train learners in language learning strategies so that they are encouraged to be independent in their learning". But to train my students, I often find that I need to start by evaluating how they are learning and if they have even the most basic study skills. To tell the truth, sometimes in the middle of a class, when I find out that one of my students has never used a dictionary before, I feel like a conductor forever practicing the same one piece of music with my orchestra over and over again. Still, if that's how I feel, I imagine it is probably that much worse for my students. For many of them, each class must seem like an hour of tuning up with no chance to truly play a song. But if I do my job right, if I help students learn how to use a dictionary, take proper class notes, and learn to notice and recycle vocabulary learned in class, then even students like Akun can start to develop the skills needed to take the noise of input and smooth it out enough to become the music of intake.

References:

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About the Author

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