

# Understanding language and learning



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# Introduction

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Have you ever thought about the role of language in learning? This free course, *Understanding language and learning*, is designed to make you reflect on the relationship between language and learning. You will explore these two concepts in ways that may challenge your current understanding of them. One of the assumptions on this course is that language and learning are inextricably intertwined. It is hard to imagine learning happening without some sort of language mediating it; and it is almost as hard to imagine language being used without some sort – however small – of learning taking place.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [EE818 \*Language, literacy and learning\*](#).

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand key issues in the relationship between language and learning
- understand the importance of language in learning
- understand the different ways in which language features in learning
- reflect critically on language and on learning.

# 1 Is this course for me?

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This course will be of interest to educational professionals, whether they teach language or any other subject, as well as to students studying language or anyone interested in how learning takes place through linguistic interaction. The course will also be of interest to a wider audience because it views learning not only as something that takes place in a formal educational context, such as a classroom or a training course, but as any kind of learning taking place informally and throughout your life, as when giving a computer tutorial to your neighbour, or interacting with someone online. The course is a standalone section of a course at postgraduate level, which means that you are expected to engage critically with what you read. If you like challenging and reflecting on commonly accepted notions and concepts, or if you are just genuinely inquisitive, then this course is for you.

## 2 Learning language and learning about the world

In this section, we are going to develop the argument that when we first learn to use language as infants we transform our understanding of language and of the world in general. In other words, we learn to use language, and through using language, we learn. This mutual reinforcement between learning language and learning more generally continues throughout our life in both formal and informal learning contexts. In this section, we will also set out the sociocultural linguistic approach (SCLA) to language learning and learning more generally. This is an approach which emphasises the inextricability of language and learning. Another feature that characterises this approach is its emphasis on learning through social interaction, in contrast to an exclusive focus of learning as a mental and cognitive process.



Figure 1 Scarlett interacting with her father

You will start to consider the relationship between language and learning by looking closely at an informal exchange between a young child, her father and her grandmother.

### Activity 1

Allow 1 hour

Video content is not available in this format.

[Scarlett, father and grandmother](#)



Watch the 'Scarlett, father and grandmother' video above. It shows Scarlett, aged two years and 11 months, talking to her father and grandmother in their garden in London, England. As you watch the unfolding interaction, note down the different types of learning you can observe. Provide an example of each. Consider, too, what role Scarlett's family plays in the learning process. If you have already studied courses on language analysis, be as specific as you can about the language used.

Aspect of language acquisition	Notes
Grammatical structures	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Vocabulary	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Pronunciation	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Interaction	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Acquiring knowledge	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

Once you have written your notes, click on 'Reveal discussion' button below to read a commentary on the video clip. Please note that whereas you were requested to make notes, this is a more 'polished' commentary since it will form an important part of the teaching. There are many ways of responding to this activity, and your reply is unlikely to have made the same observations as the ones below.

#### Discussion

In the video, Scarlett is learning different aspects of the English language. For example, she is learning new vocabulary ('beetle', 'slug', etc.), and words she has



previously learned (such as various colours and numbers) are carefully reinforced by her father and grandmother, including their correct pronunciation.

At the same time that Scarlett is learning language she is also learning something about the world. For example, she is learning (in a very rudimentary way) how to sort and classify the natural world. This includes learning how different types of insects (namely beetles and spiders) can be distinguished through different attributes (such as numbers of legs) and how slugs are different from snails through having (or not having) a shell. She is also learning to differentiate between leaves that are 'alive' and those that are dead. Such taxonomies are a fundamental resource in enabling Scarlett to begin ordering and categorising the world around her.

Scarlett is also learning how to interact with other human beings in order to exchange information and get things done. That is, she both listens and speaks to her family in an interactive process of 'turn-taking'. Although she asks very few questions she finds out many new things when in response to her father's questions she says, 'I don't know'. She can also give simple commands: 'you come here', 'you put him down', 'don't touch him', in order to get people to do things for her.

Although in mature adult speech, commands are often expressed as either imperative clauses in which the subject (you) is absent – e.g. 'come here' – or expressed indirectly through interrogative clauses – e.g. 'Could you come here?' – Scarlett tends to use declaratives to make commands, which include the subject – 'You come here'.

Did you notice how Scarlett's father and grandmother use language structures first to facilitate cooperative interaction, using mood or question tags such as 'isn't it?' and also to model causal relations, for instance 'why are they ...' and 'because they're ...'.

The clip shows that learning often occurs in social interaction. Although in other contexts this might well be peer interaction, here Scarlett is interacting with more expert adults who provide various kinds of support for her language and learning development; prompting, guiding and modelling, as appropriate. For example, Scarlett's father, Dominic, asks her (while pointing to a slug), 'Do you know what this is called?' And then prompts her, 'It begins with "s"'. He then provides the answer, 'slug'. In many ways, then, Dominic is acting as an informal teacher for Scarlett's development, with, in some cases, quite explicit teaching of both language and 'content'.

This activity demonstrates the interdependency of language and learning. This inextricability between language and learning is a fundamental characteristic of the sociocultural linguistic approach (SCLA) to language and learning. Aside from emphasising the inextricability of language and learning, another feature of SCLA is its emphasis on learning through social interaction. In other words, according to this approach, learning can only take place through interaction with other human beings. This emphasis on interaction distinguishes this approach from other approaches to learning which pay more attention to the mental and cognitive processes of learning. In the next section, we will look at this in more detail and whether language and learning is a cognitive or social process.



Figure 2 Children interacting: a sociocultural linguistic approach to language and learning

## 3 Language and learning as cognitive or social processes

The well-known US theoretical linguist Noam Chomsky is one linguist who has been more concerned with the cognitive than the social processes of language and learning. He has argued throughout his career that human beings are born with the ability to learn language and that this ability, or mental grammar, is present without having been taught (Chomsky, 1965). Where the cognitive approach is disinterested in social aspects of language learning and language use, some interactional approaches are equally disinterested in cognitive aspects of language learning and use. The sociocultural linguistic approach sits somewhere in between, foregrounding the social but also recognising the relationship between the social and the cognitive. The sociocultural linguistic approach to language and learning is often associated with the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, whose work we will discuss in a later section. Vygotsky was among a group of psychologists and philosophers of language who emphasised the social aspects of learning.

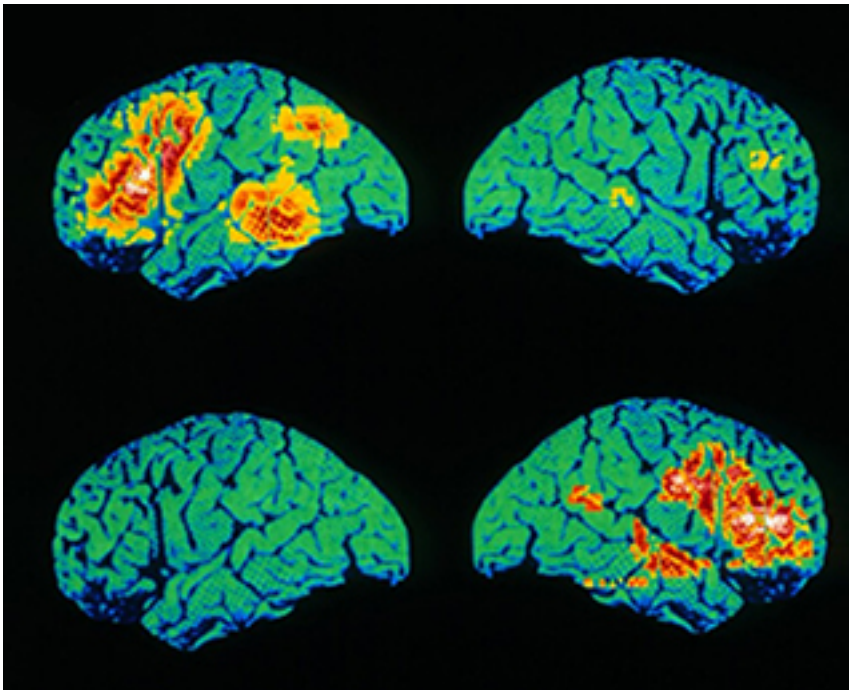


Figure 3 Colour PET scan of language areas of the brain: a cognitive approach to language and learning

A scholar who reacted directly against Chomsky was Dell Hymes, a US ethnographer and linguist. Hymes criticised Chomsky's notion of an innate linguistic competence. He saw this purely cognitive conceptualisation of linguistic competence as inadequate and coined an alternative term, communicative competence, to highlight that using language successfully is not only about knowing the rules of syntax, morphology and phonology. A language user must also know how to use and when to use utterances appropriately, thereby acknowledging the sociocultural and communicative aspects of language (Hymes, 1966). Unlike Vygotsky, Hymes is more often described as a linguistic

ethnographer than as a socioculturalist, but the underpinning idea, that language is learned through social interaction with others, is fundamentally the same.

What distinguishes the sociocultural linguistic approach from other approaches to language and language learning, then, is what we look at and how we look at it. In terms of the former, we prioritise social interaction and function over cognition and form. In terms of the latter, we favour methodologies that enable us to observe how language and learning occurs in social interaction and in context. One such methodology is ethnography, informed by anthropology, which provides insights about how social, historical and cultural contexts shape language and learning. Ethnography is one of the key methodologies used in the sociocultural linguistic approach.



Figure 4 Noam Chomsky

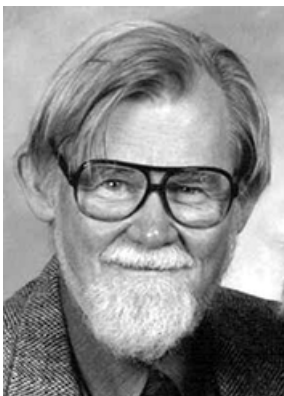


Figure 5 Dell Hymes

## 4 Learning a language, learning *through* language and learning *about* language

By observing the child–parent interaction in the earlier video we were able to draw out some answers to questions concerning language and learning and the relationship between the two. More specifically, we saw how learning takes place through language use and in social interaction with others, and we also saw how language itself is learnt in social interaction with others. A key proponent of this view is Michael Halliday, who is regarded as one of the world's leading linguists and is the leading exponent of systemic functional linguistics (SFL).



Figure 6 Michael Halliday

Halliday (2004) argues that there are three ways of thinking about the relationship between learning and language: learning a language, learning *through* language and learning *about* language. As children are socialised, they are engaged in all three processes simultaneously. They learn a language, i.e. how to form sounds and utterances in their first (or additional) language(s) (learning a language). They learn about the world as they do so, for instance, by acquiring the word 'hail' they come to learn that there is such a concept (possibly even before having experienced it in the real world) and that is different from both snow or rain (learning *through* language). And finally, they learn *about* language, i.e. through either explicit or implicit feedback and modelling, they learn how to put together phonemes, morphemes, words, and ultimately phrases together accurately. Halliday built his theory on the example of young children learning in informal contexts, so, as a way of beginning to encourage your skills in critical thinking, you may want to think about how learning in other contexts differs from this. For instance, to what extent does Halliday's argument about the three-pronged learning still apply in formal educational contexts or in contexts where adults learn? To what extent does the subject matter play a role? In the next section, we will introduce another important scholar in the area of language and learning, who shares points in common with Halliday, but also differs from his thinking in other ways.

## 5 Learning language and mental development: an introduction to Vygotsky

Halliday argues that learning a language is not so much a process of acquiring a commodity that is 'out there' but rather a process of 'construction in interaction with others' (Halliday, 2004). This is a position shared by Vygotsky who, like Halliday, has also had a significant influence on those researching and working in first- and second-language learning contexts.



Figure 7 Lev Vygotsky

Unlike Halliday, however, Vygotsky's perspective on language and learning has its origins in the discipline of psychology. Vygotsky argues that learning and mental development need to be viewed as a social process: it is through the interactions we enter into with other members of our culture, particularly those who are more knowledgeable or proficient, that we make sense of the world and learn new (usually culturally and socially specific) ways of seeing, doing and being (Vygotsky, 2011). Thus Vygotsky's emphasis on the sociocultural can be seen as breaking away from his disciplinary grounding in psychology, which is normally concerned with exploring the psyche of the individual. Vygotsky was quite radical for his time as he was among the first theorists, at least in psychology, who recognised humans as social and cultural beings. He remains very influential to this day, albeit more so in the field of education than in linguistics.

## 6 The zone of proximal development (ZPD)

An important aspect of Vygotsky's theory is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The concept emphasises the social aspects of learning by recognising the role of a 'teacher' (in an official or unofficial capacity) for a learner to realise their full potential. His view was that language arises as a means of communication between a child and those around them, and that it is the social interaction that develops children's learning and language; this places the teacher/caregiver in a very important role.

Contrary to the research dominant in the nineteenth century, Vygotsky argued that there is an optimal age for all learning and that for some topics, students might be either too young or too old to learn efficiently. Vygotsky also challenged the view that the brightest students continue to learn more than weaker students upon entering school. He makes the case that, in comparative terms, the learning of brighter students actually slows down when they enter school. On the basis of such evidence, Vygotsky introduces the concept of relative achievement, which emphasises the importance of assessing achievement in relation to the starting point. In relative terms, brighter students (measured in IQ terms) learn less and weaker students learn more. This, in turn, leads him to introduce the notion of 'zone of proximal development', which is a key concept in Vygotsky's thinking. It relates to the differences between where the child/student currently is in terms of intellectual ability, and where they could be. The implications of this idea is that a child could gain a higher degree of learning by exploiting their learning potential. Key to Vygotsky's thinking is also that this learning potential is best developed through interaction with an adult, an idea that is central to the sociocultural linguistic approach to learning adopted on this course.

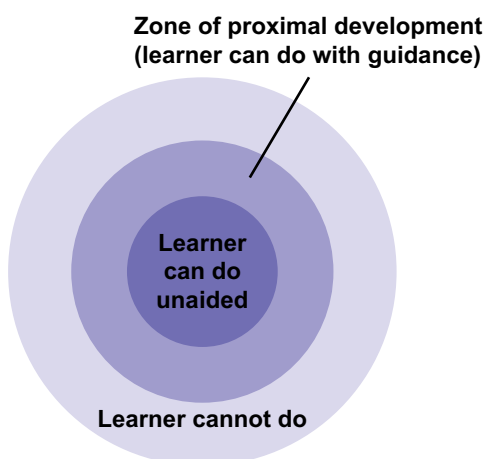


Figure 8 The zone of proximal development (ZPD)

## 7 Learning through language in bilingual education

In the video with Scarlett, you considered how learners learn through language. In the case of Scarlett, the language through which she learnt was her first language. The language which is first acquired by children is referred to as 'L1' by linguists, and any subsequent languages learned are referred to as 'L2', 'L3', etc. One context in which learning through language becomes more marked than in Scarlett's L1 context is in bilingual or multilingual education.

Bilingual or multilingual education takes place when there is more than one language involved in an educational setting. There are many different models of bilingual education and as many reasons for their existence. Various multilingual education models have evolved in order to suit the learning needs and demands of societies. For example, in many postcolonial contexts, learners from a young age are taught all subjects of the curriculum (Maths, Science, History, etc.) through an ex-colonial language, e.g. English in Ghana or French in Senegal. In some very linguistically diverse contexts, such as Nigeria where there are 527 officially recognised languages and Ghana where there are 79, English also functions as a lingua franca enabling communication between speakers who have a variety of L1s. Parents often endorse English-medium education as it is seen as bringing opportunities for social mobility. Those who have researched bilingual education and English as a medium of instruction, however, have highlighted the many negative consequences of learning through English. Usually, the advice given by researchers is to ensure that literacy is developed through the L1 and that English is introduced once a solid foundation for literacy in the L1 has been attained.

### Activity 2

Allow 10 minutes

In order to understand the relationship between language, literacy and learning, take a moment to think about the advice given by researchers of bilingual education. Why do you think it is important for a child to develop their literacy in the first language before being taught through a second language?

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

You will recall from the video with Scarlett that she was taught things about language and the world in general through linguistic interaction with her father. When Scarlett starts school she will begin to learn more systematically how sounds correspond to letters; she will begin to develop literacy in her L1. The advice given by those who have researched bilingual education to develop literacy in one's L1 first assumes that it is easier to transition into literacy, i.e. develop competence in reading and writing, if a learner is already familiar with the sounds to which the letters can correspond: for instance, that the phoneme 'k' can correspond to the letters 'c' as in 'curtain', 'k' as in 'kilo' and 'q' as in 'queen'. Once this code has been 'cracked' for one language, it is easier to apply those principles of matching to another language.





## 8 Problematising the L1/L2 dichotomy

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So far, we have operated with fairly straightforward notions of learning, and particularly of language. However, research has recently begun to problematise the dichotomy between L1 and L2. In an age characterised by an unprecedented degree of migration, transnational and translingual communication – physical as well as virtual – linguists have begun to question the idea that languages are discrete, essentialised and countable. Such scholars argue that the difference between languages is more political and ideological than empirical. Thus, the reason why mutually intelligible entities such as Swedish, Norwegian and Danish are considered *languages* but the mutually incomprehensible Hokkien and Hakka are considered *dialects* of Chinese has more to do with politics and nation building than with empirical and linguistic facts.

More specifically, there has been a conceptual shift which prompts us to move our gaze from languages as systems (English, Chinese and French) to languages as practices, which may be a lot more hybrid in nature than the notion of systems would suggest. In fact, some scholars have even begun to use the word ‘language’ as a verb (as in ‘they are languaging’) to prioritise the ‘doing’ and emergent nature of languages over their *a priori* existence (García and Wei, 2015).

This conceptual shift also has implications for L2 proficiency. When the gaze moves from languages as systems to languages as practices, there is a recognition that some people can have greater proficiency in their L2 than in their L1 in some registers. One of the course authors has an anecdote from her childhood, which illustrates this. Her Swedish mother and her mother’s Danish husband (her stepfather) sometimes got into arguments about who was better at English, a second language for both of them. Her mother’s claim was backed up by the fact that she has a degree in English and used to teach it as a second language to Swedish secondary students. Her stepfather’s claim was not based on having a degree in English, but on the fact that as an engineer he often gave talks in English at international conferences. In the particular area of engineering in which he was specialised – sanitation – he certainly knew a lot more vocabulary items in English than her mother did, and possibly more than he did in Danish, his L1. This goes to show that in certain registers you can have greater proficiency in an L2 than in your L1, thereby further blurring the distinction between L1 and L2.

Further challenges to the dichotomy between L1 and L2 can be seen with the introduction of the concept of translanguaging, which refers to the idea of mixing features from L1 and L2 (García and Wei, 2015). While such language mixing has always occurred in bilingual contexts and has been studied under headings such as ‘code-switching’, ‘code-mixing’ or ‘code-meshing’ by sociolinguists, the novelty of this concept is that researchers are beginning to recommend that translanguaging should be exploited as a resource teachers and learners can draw on to enhance learning in bilingual contexts. You will explore this in greater detail in the next activity.

## 9 English as a global language and World Englishes

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Another challenge to established paradigms prompted by globalisation and increased transnational and translingual communication can be found in the field of global English. Here, it is argued that because the number of English speakers has grown so considerably in recent decades, with estimates suggesting that non-native speakers of English now outnumber native speakers by at least three to one, new ways of thinking about norms and ownership are needed. One paradigm that has subsequently attracted criticism is Kachru's three-circle model of English speakers (Kachru, 1992). When it appeared, this was itself a groundbreaking way of thinking the English language and stimulated a wealth of research under the heading 'World Englishes'.

The field of 'World Englishes' developed towards the end of the twentieth century with the work of Braj Kachru and others to theoretically and empirically investigate the statuses and functions of the English language in various contexts around the world, and explore issues in the ownership of English. Kachru's (1992) well-known three-circle model of English speakers has become an influential way of understanding the varieties and functions of different Englishes being used in the world. This can be broken down as follows:

- The inner circle (norm providing) represents the traditional sources of English speaking, e.g. UK, USA, which have provided the language norms for English Language Teaching (ELT).
- The outer circle (norm developing) which includes countries in Africa and Asia, where English is not necessarily people's first language but has been important historically through colonisation.
- The expanding circle of countries (norm dependent) where English has never had an official status, but is now important as an additional language or lingua franca.

