

Using Second Language Acquisition Quotes with Students

Diane Neubauer

Mandarin Chinese teacher, Valor Christian High School, Colorado

As a world language teacher, I am seeking to be better informed about Second Language Acquisition (SLA) processes and research. I have also sought bite-sized ways to share that knowledge with my students. I have collected a variety of SLA quotes to that end. On most Fridays at the beginning of class, we read a quote about SLA and take a couple minutes for brief discussion. A student volunteer reads a quote aloud, and I open the floor for discussion by asking something like, “So, what do you think?” I affirm students who share their reflections, sometimes ask follow-up questions or point out some aspect of the quote, and guide the discussion to a close.

So far, I have allowed these two or three minutes in English because most of my students would not be able to discuss this kind of topic well in the language I teach, Mandarin Chinese. However, I have found the brief loss of time in the target language has been a very worthwhile exchange for the metacognition and reflection that occurs. In fact, I think that it renews their willingness to stay in the target language other times. The quotes remind them of our goals and means to developing fluency, which depends on comprehensible messages in the target language. However, the target language could be used for discussion, certainly among students with greater proficiency. With earlier levels, clever questioning by the teacher may allow for students to indicate points of agreement, disagreement, curiosity, or confusion about a quote. The teacher could clarify or ask follow-up questions in the target language at the level of student comprehension. I hope to try that approach in the future.

I originally began to share SLA quotes with my students during the first year I shifted to teaching only with Comprehensible Input (CI) methods. That first year, I had some significant pushback, especially from students who excelled at rote memory of vocabulary and from those who believed language class should revolve around competitive, output-based games. They (and some of their parents) were willing to tell me what I was doing with CI wasn't what they expected. I used quotes to demonstrate that my teaching methods had support in wider circles. (That first year I also worked hard at improving my CI teaching, adapting and learning to pace better for my students – a story for a different article.)

I have introduced students from grade 5 through grade 12 to SLA topics through our brief talks. I have found that this approach has been beneficial in numerous ways:

- It builds students' confidence that the sometimes-ambiguous process of language acquisition truly happens as we focus on the meaning, not the form, of the language;
- It builds students' confidence that I am an informed professional;
- It improves classroom management and student engagement because they trust the process and me as a teacher more;
- It allows students to reflect on how their language abilities are developing and may further develop;
- It points out to students those behaviors and dispositions that will increase their likelihood of successful acquisition;
- It highlights that the goals of my classes are real life skills and "micro-fluency," not merely grades or graduation requirements;
- It is a way to encourage students that acquiring another language is possible for regular people;
- By spreading out the quotes across the whole course, it avoids information overload at the beginning;
- And it helps highly analytical thinkers to know that "just" CI, which doesn't always "feel like" learning, is in fact the most effective and precise means we have to instruct a language.

I have included quotes by a variety of researchers and language teachers. I have also shared information more directly about acquiring my target language, Mandarin Chinese. For example, I played the first minute of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's now well-known interview at Qinghua University and asked students to notice the audience's response, which illustrated how much they loved even his not-very-pretty Mandarin. I hope to use more brief video quotes in the future, and more on Chinese character literacy development. However, anything that relates to or demonstrates the process of acquiring language is fair game to add to my file. I have found many quotes myself, but got a good start from a list gathered and shared by Eric Herman, Spanish teacher in Edgartown, Massachusetts.

Some quotes that have prompted great discussion and reflection:

- "We acquire language when we understand messages, when we understand what people tell us and when we understand what we read." Stephen Krashen
- "Language acquisition is a subconscious process; while it is happening we are not aware that it is happening, and the competence developed this way is stored in the brain subconsciously." Stephen Krashen
- "The best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is read extensively in it." Christine Nuttall, *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*

- “Learning is most successful when it involves only a limited amount of stress, when students are relaxed and confident and enjoying their learning; but the use of correction encourages exactly the opposite condition.” John Truscott.
- ...the structures we learn in a language class are the bones in your body; vocabulary is the muscle mass. Without the bones, you can pack on as much meat as you want, but you will never be able to walk. Haiyun Lu
- Reading aloud [to children] is the foundation for literacy development. It is the single most important activity for reading success (Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp 2000).

I encourage others to collect and share quotes with your students, too!

REFERENCES

- Krashen, Stephen (2013). *Second language acquisition: theory, applications, and some conjectures*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from http://www.sdkrashen.com/content/articles/krashen_sla.pdf
- Krashen, Stephen (n.d.). *How is Cosmo acquiring English?* Language Magazine. Retrieved from http://languagemagazine.com/?page_id=4404
- Lu, Haiyun (2013, September 29). *A personal reflection on staying in bound*. Retrieved from <http://tprsforchinese.blogspot.com/2013/09/a-personal-reflection-on-staying-in.html?q=reflection>
- Matthiessen, Connie (n.d.) *The hidden benefits of reading aloud – even for older kids*. Retrieved from <http://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/read-aloud-to-children/>
- Nuttall, Christine (1996, May 6). *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language: new edition*. Oxford Heinemann English Language Teaching
- Truscott, John (1996, June). *The Case Against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes*. Language Learning 46:2, pp. 327-369. Retrieved from [http://www.hss.nthu.edu.tw/~fl/faculty/John/Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Class.pdf](http://www.hss.nthu.edu.tw/~fl/faculty/John/Grammar%20Correction%20in%20L2%20Writing%20Class.pdf)
- Woolstenhulme, Martin (2014, October 23). *Mark Zuckerberg Speaks Chinese (English Translation)* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Xpdhbh_2Rc