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 meta-language 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.

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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

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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 underesti-mating what children are capable of. In a series of ingenious experi-ments, Margaret Donaldson and her colleagues have convincingly

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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:

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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

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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,*