

# From Atlas and Audiolingualism to Acquisition

In this chapter we explore:

- The classroom dynamic known as the "Atlas Complex," in which teachers assume all responsibility for what happens in the classroom
- A mid-twentieth-century teaching approach called audiolingualism (ALM), which embodied the Atlas complex par excellence
- Teachers' attempts to move away from ALM in the 1970s toward communicative language teaching, while at the same time carrying over the traditional roles of teachers and students in the classroom
- Some observed findings, or "givens," from second language acquisition research that call into question long-held notions about teaching and learning

## THE ATLAS COMPLEX

Teaching, in all subject areas, entails *roles* and *tasks*. Both instructors and students play out roles in the classroom, but what determines these roles? The role that instructors often assume (and that students very willingly grant to them) is that of the authority, the expert, the central figure in the classroom who transmits knowledge to the students. Because instructors are authoritative knowledge transmitters, the students become their passive audience, receptive vessels into which that knowledge is poured. It is not difficult to see how such a classroom is organized; Figure 1.1 captures this dynamic in schematic form. The physical setup of many classes reflects and codifies the instructor's (I) authoritative role and the students' (S) receptive role.

*Authoritative transmitter of knowledge* and *receptive vessels* are the primary roles, respectively, that instructors and students play in many traditional classrooms. The tasks we most often associate with these roles are those of lecturing and notetaking. Other, secondary roles may be enacted in language classrooms. Depending on one's point of view, some of these

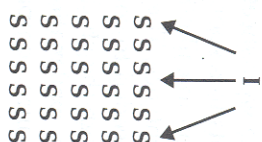


FIGURE 1.1 Knowledge transmission in a transmission-oriented class

secondary roles are neutral or positive, others negative. A partial list appears in Table 1.1.

### *Pause to consider . . .*

whose responsibility it is to learn. If the instructor is the expert and authority, what happens when students do not carry out an assignment correctly or score poorly as a group on an exam? Would (and should) the instructor take it personally? Would (and should) the students blame the instructor for their performance?

The following description of a language class exemplifies the classroom dynamic characterized by the transmission-oriented roles of instructors and the receptacle roles of students.

1. Students were given ten minutes to complete individually a worksheet that contained a series of paragraphs. In each paragraph, various grammatical elements were deleted from sentences, with multiple choices provided for each blank. There were some twenty deletions.
2. At the end of ten minutes, students were instructed to work in groups of three. As a group they were to come to an agreement on the correct answers.
3. After about seven minutes, the instructor called for the class's attention. She began going over the correct answers, one by one, in the order in

TABLE 1.1 Secondary Roles in a Transmission-Oriented Class

Instructor	Student
Lecturer	Notetaker
Leader	Follower
Tutor	Tutee
Warden	Prisoner
Disciplinarian	Disciplinee



which they appeared on the worksheet. She did not ask for volunteers but rather called on students to respond. She read each sentence to the class, pausing at the deletion to call attention to it, and then continued reading to the end of the sentence. The student who was called on supplied the word or phrase needed to complete the sentence.

4. On the second item, although the student gave the correct answer, the instructor offered a lengthy explanation of the particular grammatical item worked on (in this instance, comparisons such as *more than* and *less than*). On the fifth item, a student gave an incorrect answer and the instructor offered a lengthy explanation of the grammar point (in this instance, conjunctions). On the tenth item, a student gave an incorrect answer and the instructor gave a lengthy explanation of passive constructions. Just as the instructor was finishing the explanation, the bell rang. Ten items were left to complete.

The language instructor depicted in this example clearly exemplifies the role of authority or expert transmitter of knowledge. All action and interaction, as well as all explanations, are dictated by the instructor. The students' role is to be taught, to receive knowledge. Like the titan Atlas of Greek mythology, who supported the heavens on his shoulders, instructors such as the one described in the preceding example

assume full responsibility for all that goes on. They supply motivations, insight, clear explanations, even intellectual curiosity. In exchange, their students supply almost nothing but a faint imitation of the academic performance that they witness. [Instructors] so thoroughly dominate the proceedings that they are cut off from what the students know or are confused about. For their part, the students form a group of isolated individuals who have no more in common than their one-to-one relationship with the same individual. While [instructors] exercise their authority through control of the subject matter and the social encounter in the classroom, they lack the power to make things happen for their students. They are both caught in the middle of their classes by a host of mysterious forces—hidden assumptions, hidden expectations, and the results of their own isolating experiences. [This is] the Atlas Complex.

(Finkel & Monk, 1983, p. 85)

The Atlas Complex is not discipline specific; teacher-centered, knowledge-transmitting classrooms are the norm for many subject areas. In many chemistry classes, for example, students sit and take notes while the instructor lectures (except in lab sessions). Very often in history and political science classes, students listen to instructors give descriptions and explanations that will more than likely appear on subsequent tests. It often seems that much of American educational practice reflects the Atlas Complex.

To be sure, instructors have invested much time in becoming experts in their fields. In the classroom, they often (and perhaps rightly so) seek to share that expertise. Most instructors "assume that their principal task is one of improving the ways in which they express their expertise: Clear and precise explanations can always be sharpened; penetrating questions can always be

made more penetrating" (Finkel & Monk, 1983, p. 86). An implicit assumption here is that students actually do *learn* from the explanations instructors provide. Therefore, instructors think that by improving their explanations they will improve students' learning. Another assumption is that students learn by being asked questions: by improving the questions asked, instructors assume students will learn more. How valid are these assumptions for learning in general and language learning in particular? In Chapter 2, we briefly examine some major findings of language learning research that challenge these assumptions. For the moment, let's examine the Atlas Complex in language teaching in more detail.

### Pause to consider . . .

the cultural appropriateness of Atlas-like behavior. Can you identify cultures in which Atlas-like behavior is culturally appropriate and even expected?

## Audiolingualism

In language teaching, the instructor as central figure has always been the norm. As the profession moved from grammar and text-translation methods to a more "oral" approach, the instructor-as-authority-and-expert was codified in a teaching method called Audiolingual Methodology, commonly referred to as ALM or audiolingualism. ALM was predicated on the marriage of behaviorist psychology and then-current structural linguistics. According to behaviorist psychology, all learning—verbal and nonverbal—takes place through the process of habit formation. Habits are formed through repetition, imitation, and reinforcement. In ALM, language habits were formed by memorizing dialogues and practicing sentence patterns, usually through drills that required learners to imitate and repeat what their instructors said. Second language acquisition (SLA) was seen to be the replacement of first language habits by second language habits. Under this framework for learning and teaching, the first language (L1) was seen to interfere with the acquisition of the second (L2); that is, the first language habits got in the way of acquiring the second language habits. Maximum care was thus taken not to allow learners to make errors, because errors were evidence of bad habits. During drills, a premium was placed on error-free repetition, with no attention paid to whether or not learners understood the meaning of what they were saying.

Developed at military schools (where one did not question authority), ALM's teaching materials explicitly cast the instructor as drill leader, perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the Atlas Complex. With ALM, students were typically given a model sentence. The instructor then provided the cue that students would substitute into the sentence; some substitutions required that the sentence be altered in various ways, while other substitutions did not. The students' role has been likened to that of a parrot, since their task was to perform the substitution or transformation quickly and accurately. Note the following examples.



Change the model sentence, substituting the cue word for its corresponding element in the model.

MODEL: I don't want to eat anymore!

INSTRUCTOR'S CUE

STUDENT RESPONSE

- |             |                                |
|-------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. to sleep | I don't want to sleep anymore! |
| 2. to study | I don't want to study anymore! |
| 3. to drink | I don't want to drink anymore! |

### Activity B. Transformation Drill

Transform each sentence, substituting the past for the present.

- |              |           |
|--------------|-----------|
| 1. I eat.    | I ate.    |
| 2. He goes.  | He went.  |
| 3. We sleep. | We slept. |

What the ALM instructor did not usually provide was the opportunity for students to use the language in a meaningful or communicative way, one involving the exchange of messages. Nothing that happened in an ALM classroom could be construed as an exchange of information because *output* (the actual production of language) was severely restricted. In fact, many thought that students did not need to know what they were saying; they needed to know only that what they were saying was correct.

## Pause to consider . . .

the meaning and purpose of expressing oneself orally. Should learning be divorced from reality? Re-examine the drills in Activities A and B. Should a language learner be required to state something such as "I don't want to sleep anymore!" if it isn't true? How often in your language learning experience did you say or repeat things that had no basis in reality? Did you memorize any dialogues that you can still repeat to this day? In your experience, how often were you allowed to express real ideas, real thoughts?

## Communicative Language Teaching

With the advent of *communicative language teaching* (CLT), the instructor's role changed. The instructor was no longer simply the drill leader but was also charged with providing students with opportunities for communication, that is, using the language to interpret and express real-life messages. The Atlas Complex did not, however, disappear. ALM had so rigidly institutionalized it that we find a transition period in early CLT in which the classroom dynamic could not yet be characterized as "free" communication. In early CLT, many instructors equated communication with conversation—but conversation of a particular type: the authority figure asked the questions, the students answered

them. The instructor's task was to create a controlled environment. Instructors often did attempt to personalize the questions, and these questions usually did not require patterned responses from students. The contrast between the open-ended question "What did you do last night?" and the cued sentence pattern "\_\_\_\_\_ went to the movies last night" illustrates the shift from ALM to early CLT. The students' task was no longer to parrot but to create an answer. (In Chapter 6 we examine drills and drill types in some detail.) In short, although CLT may have caused a major revolution in the way that some people *thought* about language teaching, no major revolution occurred in the day-to-day *practice* of most language teachers.

As language teaching began its slow evolution away from methods such as ALM, the roles played by instructors and students changed very little, if at all. As we saw previously, communication was seen merely as conversation, which took the form of a question-and-answer session with the instructor in charge. Atlas's burden was yet to be relieved or shared. An example of the Atlas Complex combined with a question-and-answer conversation can be seen in the following exchange (taken from Leemann Guthrie, 1984, p. 45). As you read, note the role assumed by the instructor and try to imagine the exchange taking place in a classroom (for example, who was standing or sitting where? What was the rest of the class doing?).

- (1) INSTRUCTOR: Pensez-vous qu'il y a vraiment une personnalité française, typiquement française?
- (2) Qui?
- (3) STUDENTS: Non.
- (4) INSTRUCTOR: Non? Pourquoi?
- (5) (Pause)
- (6) CLAUDIA?
- (7) STUDENT: Um... Je pense qu'il y a une...
- (8) INSTRUCTOR: (Interrupting) Qu'il y a une personnalité française?
- (9) Bon, décrivez la personnalité française.
- (10) STUDENT: *How do you say "pride"?*
- (11) INSTRUCTOR: Oh... vous avez déjà eu deux mots. (Writing on blackboard) Okay, «La fierté» est comme en anglais "pride," et l'adjectif, «fier».
- (12) Je suis fier. I'm proud.
- (13) Bon, est-ce que les Français sont très fiers?
- (14) Ils ont beaucoup de fierté?
- (15) (Silence)
- (16) Est-ce que les Français sont nationalistes?

[translation]

- (1) TEACHER: Do you think there is really one French personality, a typically French personality?
- (2) Yes?
- (3) STUDENTS: No.
- (4) TEACHER: No? Why?
- (5) (Pause)
- (6) CLAUDIA?



- (7) TEACHER: *(Interrupting)* That there's a French personality?  
 (8) Good, describe the French personality.  
 (9) STUDENT: How do you say "pride"?  
 (10) TEACHER: Oh . . . You've already had two words.  
 (11) *(Writing on blackboard)* Okay, "la fierté" is like in English  
 "pride," and the adjective, "fier."  
 (12) *Je suis fier*, I'm proud.  
 (13) Good, are the French very proud?  
 (14) Do they have a lot of pride?  
 (Silence)  
 (15) Are the French nationalistic?

The instructor as central figure and authority is clearly evidenced in line 5, where she selects the next person who will speak rather than a conversational partner. In line 7, the instructor again asserts her role as authority figure by finishing the student's sentence for her. Claudia, the student, subsequently appeals to the instructor's expert knowledge of the French language, one of the forces that binds instructors to the Atlas Complex. The instructor obliges Claudia's appeal, yet she offers a much more detailed account of the French language than Claudia requested, the assumption being that students learn from explanations. The instructor, incidentally, also assumes to know what Claudia's opinion is, since she never gives Claudia the opportunity to express her opinion before interrupting her and completing her sentence for her. This instructor imposes herself on Claudia's self-expression. In lines 13-15, rather than waiting for Claudia to use the explanation provided, the instructor continues to ask questions. The result? Silence. When silence ensues, she asks another question using an altogether different adjective. In order to maintain her role as authority, this instructor assumed the responsibility of not only asking questions but also answering them. As Leemann Guthrie (1984) points out about this exchange, "It is clear that the [instructor] defines her own role not as that of a conversational partner or facilitator, but as one responsible for telling her students how to speak" (p. 46).

### *Pause to consider . . .*

how different the interactional dynamic and resulting discussion between Claudia and her instructor might have been. Why do you think silence resulted from the instructor's explanation of *fier* and *fierce*? How might the interaction have been different if the instructor had responded to Claudia by saying nothing more than "Fierté" in response to her question?

In the next phase of CLT, the instructor was not the only one to ask questions. In this phase, a novel classroom dynamic emerged: students were now allowed to work in pairs and to pose questions to each other. But for many, the basic assumed roles of transmitter and receptacles were played out in pair work

as well. In the following exercise, aimed at fostering communication, a model is provided that clearly spells out the Atlas-like question-and-answer model of conversation, even though the instructor is not part of the exercise.

### **Activity C. What Did You Eat Last Night?**

With another student, ask and answer questions according to the model.

MODEL: french fries → Did you eat french fries last night?  
 → Yes, I ate them. (No, I did not eat them.)

1. tacos
2. hamburgers
3. a steak
4. tuna casserole

During this exercise students ask each other questions that they can answer truthfully, but the real intent is to practice producing direct-object pronouns. The instructor is most likely monitoring students' performance. Are they asking the questions correctly? Are they answering them in complete sentences? Is the respondent using the correct direct-object pronoun? This activity has a clear focus on form rather than on meaning or communication.

Thus, even though pair work was intended to provide speaking opportunities, the resulting speech did not necessarily entail true communication, namely, the interpretation and expression of meaning. Many paired exercises differed very little from the classic ALM pattern-substitution drills, with their rigid constraints on what could be said and how it could be said. In the evolution of language teaching, we find that practice did not keep up with theory: instructors might have wanted to take on new roles, but the classroom activities still emphasized formal correctness, not communication.

Theory and practice did begin to converge as instructors began to talk to their students. That is, in addition to providing controlled exercises such as Activities A-C, they also engaged in more open-ended conversations. In the next example (from a classroom whose instructor explicitly claimed to be teaching communicatively), the instructor is dialoging with the students. Many instructors use the technique of asking personalized questions to begin a class, perhaps incorporating grammar and vocabulary from the previous day's work. The resulting conversations have a much more natural feel than do the conversations examined previously. Does this instructor still carry an Atlas-like burden?

INSTRUCTOR: What did you do last week? Raúl.

RAÚL: I went to Florida. To the beach. We ate in a lot of restaurants.

INSTRUCTOR: That sounds like a fun week. Gloria, what did you do last week?

GLORIA: Not much. My husband and I read. We watched TV.

INSTRUCTOR: Did you go to Florida?

GLORIA: No.

INSTRUCTOR: Did you go to Florida last week? John.

JOHN: Me? No. I went to Bloomington to visit my parents.



Leemann & Gauthier illustrate, the instructor is still the central figure. In a typical classroom, the instructor will call on a student to answer, probe the student's response, and let the student know when she has completed her turn by calling on another student. The students answering the question will most likely address only the instructor and not their classmates, as the instructor is controlling the interaction. The entire burden is on the instructor, who initiates, responds, follows up, keeps the interaction going, and assigns turns. We will see in the next section some alternative ways instructors can engage students in using the second language without being so Atlas-like.

### Pause to consider . . .

the nature of conversations. Was the verbal interaction between the four speakers in the example a true conversation? Did any of the individual students carry on a conversation with the instructor? How conversational can the exchange be if the students merely answer questions but never ask any of either the instructor or each other?

In the activities and exercises we have examined, the instructor assumes an authoritative role and then asserts it in all situations. Both instructors and students accept the fact that instructors are language authorities or experts and ought, therefore, to be the central figures in the classroom. A central reason that instructors assume the authority role is the way in which many people view language learning. As we noted, ALM viewed language learning as the acquisition of correct habits, and correct habits were learned through repetition and reinforcement. The language instructor's role, then, was to ensure that correct habits were learned and that no one deviated from the path of accuracy. This focus on correct habit formation demanded absolute control not only over how students spoke but also over what students said. Thus, drills and pattern practices naturally became staple classroom interactional routines. As Finkel and Monk (1983) point out, hidden assumptions bind instructors and students to the Atlas Complex, among them the popular beliefs about how adults learn languages. But does language acquisition actually happen as the theorists of 1955 envisioned? What do we know about language acquisition? In the next section, we briefly review some findings from the field of second language acquisition research.

## SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: SOME GIVENs

In a book of this nature, it is impossible to synthesize all of what we now know about the nature of second language acquisition; that is the job of other books (e.g., Ellis, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 2001; VanPatten, 2003a). For the purposes of our discussion, we need only to review some of the accepted findings in SLA

roles in the classroom.

Borrowing from VanPatten (2003a), we discuss here five "givens" about SLA relevant to language teaching. These can be considered *observable facts* culled from thirty-five years of accumulated evidence in the field of SLA research and uncontested by any theoretical account of SLA. These givens are

1. SLA involves the creation of an implicit (unconscious) linguistic system.
2. SLA is complex and consists of different processes.
3. SLA is dynamic but slow.
4. Most L2 learners fall short of native-like competence.
5. Skill acquisition is different from the creation of an implicit system.

We examine each of these in turn.

### SLA Involves the Creation of an Implicit (Unconscious) Linguistic System

Like first language learners, second language learners ultimately construct an *implicit linguistic system* consisting of a variety of components that interact in language use (e.g., a lexical system of words and grammatical inflections such as noun markers and verb markers, a phonological system that governs the sounds, a syntactic system that controls the structure of sentences). By *implicit* we mean an unconscious system that lies outside of awareness; we are unaware of its properties even though we use it every single second of our lives. For example, every native speaker of English knows that we can contract *want* and *to* in order to form *wanna* in everyday speech. However, every native speaker of English also knows that only one of the following sentences is a possible English sentence:

1. Who do you wanna invite to the party tonight?
2. Who do you wanna bring the potato chips tonight?

For speakers of English, (1) sounds fine, but (2) sounds awful and is generally rejected as a possible sentence. However, these same speakers would accept as possible (3) *Who do you wanta bring the potato chips tonight?* At the same time, the speakers will tell you that they have no idea why (2) is bad but (1) and (3) are acceptable. This is because the rules of syntax that govern sentence structure (of which contraction is part) lie outside their awareness in an implicit system. Likewise, they could not tell you why in English they have to use a [z] sound when pluralizing *dog* → *dogs* but have to use an [ɪz] sound when pluralizing *house* → *houses*.

Although second language learners may not arrive at the same implicit rules as native speakers (a point we discuss later), they do create an implicit system that functions in the same manner. In a good deal of research, investigators have given learners judgment tests like the one mentioned (i.e., Which sentence is possible and which isn't?) and the learners usually come up with the right answers. What is important about this is that researchers test them on things they could never have been taught and could never have learned from instruction or feedback. Like native speakers, if asked "Why"



when giving a judgment, they either make something up (because they think they are supposed to know!) or they simply say, "I don't know. It just sounds wrong." But it is also worth pointing out that second language learners may indeed have *conscious* or *explicit rules* or knowledge about rules, especially if they have experienced any classroom language learning. They may know things and be able to express in some way rules such as verb-subject agreement, the difference between an active and a passive sentence, when to use *du* in French, that German requires case marking on articles before nouns, or the difference between the two linking verbs *ser* and *estar* in Spanish. However, this conscious knowledge of *some* rules is not the same as and, as we see later, is not the starting point for the creation of the developing system.

The finding that learners come to know things they couldn't have been taught has led the field of SLA theory and research to posit a fundamental role for what we call *input*. Input is *the language learners hear that is meant to convey a message*; that is, the learner's job is to attempt to understand what is being said. In this sense, it is language that is *meaning bearing*. To be clear, input is not explanation about language, nor is it explicit corrective feedback because the learner has made an error. We can illustrate this with the pluralization example in English. It is not input when we tell learners the rule for pluralization; it is input when learners hear pluralization in sentences that they are to attend to for meaning, for example, "So, just how many houses do you think Bill Gates owns?" or "Did you have pets while growing up?" It is not input when we stop learners and correct them by saying, "Not watch[ɪz] but watch[fɪzzzzzz]." It is input when we say to them, "He fixes watches? Is that what you mean?" In short, input is language embedded in some kind of communicative interchange no matter how trivial or how important. The role of the learner is to attend to the meaning in order to respond to the content or perform a task. Embedded in input are many subtle clues about the way language works, and it is only by getting lots of input that learners can build up an implicit linguistic system.

Krashen (1982 and elsewhere) has put forth the *Input Hypothesis*. His claim is very strong: Comprehensible input *causes* acquisition. He believes that as long as there is motivation and the right affective environment (e.g., low anxiety), a person cannot avoid learning a second language if there is sustained comprehensible input. Others don't make as strong a claim and suggest that language acquisition is a complex process involving social, cognitive, linguistic, and other factors. Because not all language learners are equally successful, there must be more at work than comprehensible input. Nonetheless, every scholar today believes that comprehensible input is a critical factor in language acquisition. Long (1990) puts it quite nicely when he says that comprehensible input is a necessary (but perhaps not sufficient) ingredient of language acquisition (see also Gass, 1997). What this means is that *successful language acquisition can not happen without comprehensible input*. Classroom learners who get a steady diet of explanations and practice might appear to have some kind of language ability, but it is not the same as those who get consistent and constant exposure to comprehensible input. At the same time, learners need more than comprehensible input. As we shall see later in this book, learners also need

opportunities to use the language in communicative interaction. Although input may be responsible for the evolution of the language system in the learner's head, having to use the language pushes the learner to develop what we call *communicative language ability*.

## SLA Is Complex and Consists of Different Processes

It is, in a sense, misleading to talk about second language acquisition in the singular. The term suggests there is one process that accounts for how acquisition happens, which in turn leads people naively to believe that there is one theory of SLA. In actuality, we should talk about second language acquisition *processes*. At the same time, we also have to recognize that although we often concern ourselves as language teachers with such rudimentary notions as vocabulary and grammar, what the learner actually acquires over time is much more. To learn a second language, here is a partial list of what a person must acquire (depending on the language type):

- The lexicon, that is, words, including their forms and meanings. For example, the concept of a small domestic feline (the meaning) is generally expressed by the form [kæʃl].
- What words can do. For example, some verbs, such as *hit*, can take an object, as in "John is good at hitting home runs," and others, such as *seem*, cannot, as in the impossible sentence, "John is good at seeming home runs."
- The phonology, that is, the sound system, pronunciation. This includes such things as learning the r/l distinction in English (if you're a Japanese speaker), learning pluralization (that the use of the [s], [z], and [ɪz] sounds are governed by the vowel or consonant sound that immediately precedes the addition of a plural marker), or learning how to syllabify when speaking (for example, in English when we speak, we constantly create syllables that end or begin in consonants and consonant clusters. Indeed, we would normally pronounce "clusters" as *clu-sters*, whereas in Spanish the verb "estar" would be pronounced *es-tar*).
- Inflectional morphology. This includes, for example, endings on verbs and nouns, as in *talk, talks, talked* and *dog, dogs*.
- Derivational morphology, that is, the use of prefixes and sometimes suffixes to create new words, such as *transportation* from *transport* and *misbehave* from *behave*. It also includes knowing that some formations are impossible; for example, something can be *unlawful* but not *dislawful*, and someone can be *disloyal* but not *unloyal*.
- Particles. For example, in Japanese, certain one-syllable words are tagged onto sentences to indicate a question or some other type of utterance to distinguish these from mere statements.
- Syntax, that is, the rules that govern what is a permissible sentence and what is not, such as examples (1), (2), and (3) in the previous section.
- Pragmatics, that is, what a speaker intends by a sentence. For example, in English, questions can be used to make a suggestion, as in "Why



don't you take a break?" or to solicit information, as in "Why is SLA so difficult?"

- Sociolinguistics, that is, what is appropriate and inappropriate use of language in particular situations, such as whether to use *tu* or *vous* in French or "Howz it goin?" instead of "Good afternoon" in English, or whether you should speak at all!

- Discourse competence, that is, what makes language cohesive and what is permissible or accepted in a language regarding cohesion across sentences. For example, these sentences are cohesive: "Mary ran down the street. John saw her, but he didn't say anything." These are not: "Mary ran down the street. He didn't say anything. John did see her." Discourse competence also includes "knowing" such things as turn-taking during conversation.

And this list is a reduction and simplification of what needs to be learned. Now, imagine that learning those things *happens all at the same time in SLA*, and you can begin to see just how complex the learning process is when it comes to the *what* of language.

As for the *how* of acquisition, that is, the processes, at least three distinct sets of processes are involved in language acquisition, all of them going on at the same time. We can outline them in the following way:

- *Input processing*: How learners make sense out of the language they hear and how they get "linguistic data" from it
- *System change*. This process involves two subprocesses:
  - *accommodation*: How learners actually incorporate a grammatical form or structure into the implicit system of the language they are creating
  - *restructuring*: How the incorporation of a form or structure can cause a ripple effect and make other things change without the learner ever knowing
- *Output processing*: How learners acquire the ability to make use of the implicit knowledge they are acquiring to produce utterances in real time, for example, during conversational interactions or while making a presentation in class

These processes in turn have subprocesses so that the learner's brain is manipulating quite a few things at once. We need not go into these processes here since they are explained and described elsewhere in detail (see VanPatten, 2003a). What we do need to point out, though, is that just because something appears in the input does not mean that learners get it right away. During input processing, for example, learners *selectively* attend to features in the input, a selectivity that is driven by internal processes and strategies about which we will see in Chapter 8. Thus, learners filter and even sometimes *alter* what they pick up in the input. And just because these linguistic data have been somewhat processed in the input does not mean they are automatically accommodated into the learner's linguistic system. For reasons we do not quite understand, some linguistic forms are incorporated and others are not. These latter are literally "dumped" from working memory once a sentence is comprehended and do not receive any further attention by the learner's internal

processors. Thus, the learner is constantly filtering data from the input; acquisition is slow and piecemeal, as we will see in the next section.

## SLA Is Dynamic but Slow

As long as learners continue to get input, the implicit system they create over time evolves constantly. At the same time, nothing comes quickly; there is no such thing as instantaneous acquisition. For this reason we say that acquisition is *dynamic* (it evolves), but it is *slow* (it takes years for learners to build up a system that is anywhere native-like).

What does this evolution or dynamism look like? One example can be found in developmental sequences or *stages of development*. Stages of development refer to how, over time, a learner acquires a particular feature of the language or a particular structure. We might ask ourselves, "How does the learner acquire negation in English?" or "How does the learner acquire *ser* and *estar* in Spanish?" These are questions that speak directly to stages of development.

One of the classic examples of stages of development involves the acquisition of negation in English. Researchers studying both classroom and non-classroom learners have observed a general tendency to pass through four stages of development for this one grammatical feature. The errors made at each stage do not seem to be influenced by any particular L1, since learners from a wide variety of L1 backgrounds all pass through these stages. (The examples that follow are taken from Ellis, 1986, pp. 59–60).

*Stage 1: no + PHRASE*

No drink.

No you playing here.

*Stage 2: negator moves inside phrase; not and don't added to list of negators, but don't is considered one-word*

I no can swim.

I don't see nothing mop.

*Stage 3: negator attached to modals but initially may be unanalyzed as is don't in Stage 2*

I can't play this one.

I won't tell.

*Stage 4: auxiliary system of English is developed, and learner acquires correct use of not and contractions*

He doesn't know anything.

I didn't said it.

As these patterns for the acquisition of negation in English suggest, learners make particular kinds of errors at particular stages in the acquisition of a structure. Each stage marks some kind of restructuring in the mind of the learner regarding that particular structure. That is, a structure does not just "pop into the heads" of learners; it *evolves* over time.

In a study of the acquisition of Spanish *ser* and *estar* (equivalents of *to be* in English), VanPatten also found stages of development in classroom learners.



He found a tendency for learners to pass through five stages of development in their acquisition of basic uses of the Spanish copular (linking) verbs, with Stage 2 lasting some time for English speakers learning Spanish. (The following examples are taken from VanPatten, 1987; asterisks indicate ungrammatical constructions.)

Stage 1: no copular verb  
\*Juan alto. (John tall.)

Stage 2: acquisition of *ser* and its overextension in contexts where *estar* would be appropriate

*Maria es muy simpática.* (Mary is very nice.)

\**Ella es estudiar.* (She's studying.)

\**Mis padres son a Chicago.* (My parents are in Chicago.)

\**Soy muy contento hoy.* (I'm very happy today.)

Stage 3: acquisition of *estar* + progressive  
*Está estudiando.* (She's studying.)

Stage 4: acquisition of *estar* + location  
*Están en Chicago.* (They're in Chicago.)

Stage 5: acquisition of *estar* + adjectives of condition  
*Estoy muy contento.* (I'm very happy.)

Stages of development have been found for word order in German, WH-questions in English (that is, the structure of questions containing *when*, *who*, *why*, *where*, and so forth), tense and aspect in Romance languages and English, and case making, among other linguistic structures. (Stages overlap; a learner may clearly be in Stage 2 of the acquisition of a structure but have residual patterns from Stage 1, for example.) Stages of development suggest that learners actively organize language in their heads independently of external influence. Something causes them to make certain kinds of errors and not others, and something produces certain universal patterns of acquisition regardless of the L1.

The slowness of acquisition is demonstrated by the fact that learners may take a number of years (even with lots of input) to go through such stages. And first language influence may cause learners to linger in one stage more than another. Such is the case with negation. Spanish-speaking learners of English tend to linger in Stage 2 more than do learners of French (in which negation is postverbal with *pas*), but both sets of speakers experience all of the stages. Likewise, English-speaking learners of Spanish may linger in Stage 2 for the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* because the stage resembles their own language's "one copula" system. Chinese speakers learning Spanish, on the other hand, do not have a copula verb and so would not linger in Stage 2 as long as English speakers do. (They would linger longer in Stage 1 because this stage resembles Chinese.) Both sets of learners, however, will eventually traverse all the stages on their way to native-like competence with these structures.

Another example of the slowness of acquisition is to be found in what are called *acquisition orders*. These orders refer to the sequential acquisition of various grammatical features over time without focusing on the acquisition of

any particular item (as in the case of stages of development research). Certain elements of grammar are learned before others, and this progression can be observed and quantified in learners' oral production. The grammatical features studied in the 1970s were *morphemes* (pieces and parts of words, such as verb endings and noun endings) and *functors* (words such as *the*, *is*, *a*, and *an*, which have particular grammatical functions in sentences). In English, for example, it has been shown that the acquisition of verb morphemes tends to follow the following order:

1. *-ing*
2. regular past tense
3. irregular past tense
4. third-person present tense *-s*

In other words, if we studied the language produced by learners of English, we would first see the greatest accuracy in the use of *-ing* with verbs in our learners' output. The last thing we would see is accuracy in the use of third-person *-s*. This order would be apparent regardless of the learner's L1. In other words, Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic speakers of English follow the same acquisition order for verb morphemes. This order is thus believed to be universal for learners of English. To be sure, some learners might progress through the order faster than others; still others might never complete the acquisition process because they could not quite get third-person *-s* into their speech. But we would nevertheless be able to see a universal pattern of acquisition. Acquisition orders also provide empirical evidence that learners possess "internal strategies" for organizing language data and that these strategies do not necessarily obey outside influences (Corder, 1981).

### Most L2 Learners Fall Short of Native-like Competence

In spite of instructors' efforts to "ensure" accuracy and in spite of some measures of performance that include a component for accuracy, most learners never become native-like in their acquisition of a second language. Either their implicit system is nonnative-like or their ability to use the implicit system is no matter how fluent or accurate they are with grammar and other aspects of the language. Second language learners often have certain late stage aspects of development that are never acquired, for example, the otherwise very accurate and eloquent nonnative who still says, "She wants to know what is his name," rather than the more native "She wants to know what his name is." Second language learners may never quite get some of the lexical differences between languages, as in the case of Agatha Christie's sleuth, Hercule Poirot, who routinely uses the word *déranger* when meaning "bother," as in "I'm sorry to derange you with this little matter." (In French *déranger* means "to bother." French is Monsieur Poirot's native language.)

Learners, of course, plateau at all different kinds of levels; that is, their non-nativeness is not all at the same level of nonnativeness. The point here is that they are nonnative-like in a number of ways. Why learners seldom become native-like is still unknown. Some scholars have found evidence for a critical



period, a time around puberty from which learning another language is difficult. Others find evidence that there is no critical period at puberty; that learning is constantly attenuated, and that it may have a lot to do with time on task (how much input you get over time). In Birdsong (1999), these diverse points of view are evident, as they are in Harley and Wang (1997).

## Skill Acquisition Is Different From the Creation of an Implicit System

It is one thing to develop some kind of implicit system. Being able to use it is altogether different. Thus, we can separate out skill acquisition, especially speaking skills, from the notion of any underlying system on which speaking might draw. Learners, for example, may be quite aware of certain distinctions in a language, say the vowel contrast between the two words *look* and *cook*, but might not be able to produce them. Learners may be able to judge a certain sentence as possible or impossible but not be at the stage where the rule on which they rely can be used in sentence generation.

The implication from this observation about SLA is that skill acquisition happens independently of the creation of the linguistic system, even though speaking must access the system in order for the learner to express meaning. In one theory, called *Processability Theory* (Pienemann, 1998), an entire developmental ordering of "output procedures" is presented and discussed, and as the author himself says, the concern of the theory is about how learners acquire the *procedures* necessary for creating novel utterances and not the acquisition of the linguistic system itself. The procedures are used to put together linguistic elements in real time (while speaking) and exist in the mind of the learner as *mechanisms* and not as *knowledge*.

### Pause to consider . . .

the implications for a teacher's role after reviewing the givens of SLA research. Is the role of Atlas sustainable? Just who is in charge of acquisition? If there is a new role or new roles for the communicatively oriented teacher, what might it/they be?

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have seen that many instructors take on the burden of ensuring learning by the roles they and their students adopt in the classroom. Very often this dynamic plays out in the Atlas Complex, in which teachers assume the role of transmitter and verifier of information while learners assume the role of knowledge recipient. Even though the profession abandoned ALM as a singular approach to language teaching as it attempted to embrace communicative methodologies, the role of the teacher did not change. We can

still find an Atlas-like role played out in question-answer "conversations" that teachers carry out with students in their classrooms.

At the same time that language teaching has attempted to shift from the mechanistic approach of ALM, researchers in second language acquisition have accumulated a body of work that offers us certain observed phenomena that we must address as teachers. Apparently, the language learner is in much more control of acquisition than anyone had assumed prior to the 1970s. And ultimately we may come to the conclusion that languages are, in essence, unteachable; that is, that we cannot force or cause the creation of the learner's implicit system. We may not be able to force or cause the acquisition of speech-making procedures that are essential to skill development. Our conclusion may very well be that we can only provide opportunities in the classroom for acquisition to happen, but that these opportunities must be informed by what we know about acquisition. As such, our roles as teachers in the classroom may change—and the roles of the students may change as well.

Throughout this book, we explore ways in which instruction can work *in unison* with acquisitional processes rather than *against* them. We emphasize that what happens in language classrooms reflects the view that students are not merely recipients and instructors are not merely transmitters. Instructors must resist the constant temptation to display their knowledge of the language they teach. Instead, they must formulate tasks to maximize learners' contributions to the language-learning enterprise. To ensure that kind of result, the students who were put into groups in order to reach a consensus about the correct answer should be allowed to state their thought processes and to know that their work in groups counted for something. Likewise, Claudia (in the Leemann Guthrie example) should have been allowed to state her opinion and not have it stated for her. Similarly, learners must be provided with opportunities to express real information and not merely the information in drills. And finally, learners must be given opportunities to construct communicative interactions in the classroom as they would outside the classroom—to interpret, express, and negotiate meaning. In short, to move students beyond the role of recipient, we must give them both the responsibility and the appropriate materials. Most important, they must learn how to carry out that responsibility.

## KEY TERMS, CONCEPTS, AND ISSUES

Atlas Complex	habit formation
classroom dynamic	pattern practices and substitution drills
roles dictate tasks	Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)
knowledge transmission and receptive vessels	conversation
secondary roles for instructors and learners	question-and-answer only
Audiolingual Methodology (ALM)	paired work
	classroom versus nonclassroom



implicit linguistic system	restructuring
conscious or explicit rules	output processing
input	dynamic but slow
meaning-bearing	stages of development
explanation is not input	acquisition orders
correction is not input	native-like competence
complex processes	critical period
input processing	skill acquisition versus acquisition
accommodation	of an implicit system

THINKING MORE ABOUT IT:  
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Brooks (1990) has pointed out that when learners work together in pairs, one of the partners may reenact the instructor's role. Examine the following exchange (based on Brooks, pp. 158–159) between two learners who are working in pairs asking and answering questions. What do you infer the instructor's role to be in their class?

STUDENT A: ¿Cómo es Luisa?  
STUDENT B: Luisa, Althh, es... Luisa.

Linda (prosodic stress on 'as'), linda (prosodic stress on 'as').  
STUDENT A: ¿Linda o linda? (prosodic stress on 'as' and 'a')  
STUDENT B: Linda. (prosodic stress on 'a')

You're right.

STUDENT A: Muy bien. It's not plural. Okay.

STUDENT B: Switch?

STUDENT A: Switch.

STUDENT B: Por favor, señor, ¿cómo son Luisa?

STUDENT A: ¿Cómo son o cómo es?

STUDENT B: Would that be cómo es?

¿Cómo es Luisa?

STUDENT A: Luisa es muy simpática.

STUDENT B: Muy simpática.

2. Examine the list of things people must acquire as part of their implicit system on pages 17–18 and consider your own second language acquisition. In what areas do you think you are native-like? In what areas do you think you are decidedly nonnative-like? Compare this with others in your class. Then consider these well-known nonnative speakers of English and ask the same questions about their native-likeness and nonnative-likeness when not acting or singing:

- Arnold Schwarzenegger
- Céline Dion
- Antonio Banderas
- Jackie Chan

Observe the same instructor a total of three times, once a week for three weeks. Each time, make notes on the following: (1) physical setup of the room (rows, semicircle, groups, etc.); (2) the number of teacher-fronted (Atlas-like) exercises compared to the number of non-Atlas-like exercises; and (3) circumstances under which the instructor uses the learners' native language. Prepare a report of your findings.

MAKING COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE  
TEACHING HAPPEN: PORTFOLIO ACTIVITIES

Given what we know about learner control of acquisition, develop a list of ideas for handling learners' errors in the classroom and in written production. Would you treat all errors equally? Would you correct any and all errors? Would you ignore them altogether? Under what conditions would you correct and not correct? Is there a difference between semantic or vocabulary and grammatical errors in your mind? Is there some method of feedback other than "direct" error correction that makes sense to you?