

Language Learning Principles

by [Carol J. Orwig](#)

Complete Table of Contents

Summary

This book is a collection of language learning principles and guidelines for language learners. The general principles describe what the editors of the bookshelf hold to be important truths about second language acquisition. The guidelines give advice on what to do, based on the general principles. Many of the principles are linked to illustrative stories from the Language Learning Story database. These principles and guidelines can help language learners understand what to do to learn a language more effectively, and why they are doing what they are doing.

General language learning principles

Principles about language in general

Language is systematic

Languages have a sound system

In some languages the tone system carries as much meaning as consonants and vowels

Languages have a grammatical system

Languages have a lexical system

There is seldom a one-to-one correspondence between words in two languages

Language is used in discourses

People sometimes speak or write in monologues

Language is used interactively in conversation

Language is meaningful

Language has referential meaning

Language has functional meaning

Language has social meaning

Language has cultural meaning

There are variations in language due to regional, status, and stylistic differences

Knowing a language involves control of integrated skills

Language skills may be productive or receptive

Some chunks of language are stored and used as wholes

People use language creatively by recombining elements

Language knowledge may be intuitive

Principles about learner characteristics

People are wired to learn languages

Aptitude can speed up learning

Some learners take on a different persona when speaking another language

Some learners resist sounding and acting differently

Some learners have a higher tolerance for ambiguity than others

Learners who use learning strategies effectively are more successful

Learning in your preferred learning style increases motivation and effectiveness

Principles about learner attitudes and motivation

Motivation affects the time spent learning a language

Learner attitudes affect motivation

If you expect to succeed, you will be more likely to succeed

If you have unreasonable expectations you may get discouraged

Certain kinds of anxiety can interfere with your language learning

Fear of making mistakes can inhibit your learning

Too much correction or criticism can inhibit your learning

The more positive you feel about the speakers of a language, the more motivation you will have to learn it

If you want to communicate with speakers of a language, you will be more motivated to learn it

If you need to use a language, you will be more motivated to learn it

Principles about language learning situations

People learn better if their learning is encouraged by speakers of the language

People need to experience language used in context

If speakers of two languages really want to communicate, they can do a lot with a little

People have expectations about who speaks which language

Communication tends to take the easiest path

People may resist speaking their language because they want to learn your language

People often modify their speech when speaking to foreigners

In traditional cultures there may be only one right way to do something

It may be culturally inappropriate to be too direct in what you say

Every culture has taboo topics

Principles about the language you are learning

The more the language you are learning is like one you already know, the more quickly you will learn it

Differences between two languages interfere when you try to learn them

Some features of language are harder to learn than others

Principles about language acquisition

Language acquisition is a developmental process

People learning a language build up their own systems

You need lots of comprehensible input

You can improve your sound discrimination, memory, and grammatical sensitivity skills

You can compensate for deficiencies in some skills

The sooner you can acquire the grammatical system of a language, the sooner you can use the language creatively

You need chances to negotiate meaning with native speakers

Native speakers often highly value good pronunciation

Repetition helps things stick

Producing language that sounds too good can be misleading

The more meaningful exposure, the more you learn

You cannot rely on memorization alone

Memorized material can give a false impression of your proficiency
 Your brain analyzes language whether you know it or not
 Knowing a language is different from knowing about a language
 Knowing about a language may help you learn it
 Body language, gestures, and your face communicate as much as words
 Learners build up an auditory image of what the language sounds like
 Language learners need to learn to understand and produce well-formed discourses
 Predictable scripts aid comprehension
 Language learners seem to hit plateaus
 You need exposure to language in a variety of social settings
 One language may interfere with another
 The mind tends to filter out redundant material
 Productive skills are harder than receptive skills
 Comprehensible output can become comprehensible input
 Knowing the topic helps you interpret what you hear or read
 Linguistic context helps you understand the meaning of words
 Knowledge of a language may lie dormant, but be reactivated
 Multilingual people may associate languages with a particular setting or audience

Guidelines for language learners

Be proactive

Take advantage of everything that happens for language acquisition
 Use selective attention to help your accuracy
 Combine formal and informal learning
 Put yourself in situations where you have to use the language you are learning
 Establish that you want to speak the language you are learning

Be creative in finding ways to practice the language

Expand the areas of language you can operate in
 Use a variety of strategies to help yourself learn
 Take opportunities to use the language
 Set yourself achievable goals

Find ways to generate comprehensible input

Help yourself understand
 Use analysis to help you understand how the language works
 Get exposure to different kinds of discourses

Use media resources

Look for reading material of the appropriate difficulty
 Use cognates, but use them carefully
 Don't always try to understand every word you hear

Help yourself remember

Apply what you have learned as soon as possible
 Make up games that work like drills
 Memorize things when you have to
 Associate words with images to help you understand and remember them
 Reinforce learning with actions

Encourage yourself

Find ways to relax and get away from the language for short breaks
 Believe that you can learn a second language
 Find ways to express your personality
 Accept the fact that you sound like a child, even though you are an adult
 Remind yourself of your motivation
 Find nonthreatening people to talk with
 Look for situations you can participate in without pressure to speak a lot
 Do not let your desire to be correct keep you from talking
 Set yourself up for small successes
 Learn to take risks wisely
 Expect to make mistakes, and learn from them
 Be patient with yourself and persevere
 Learn to laugh at your mistakes
 Watch people's reactions to what you say
 Find ways to explore your interests using the language
 Consciously remind yourself of what you like about the culture, the people, the language
 Remind yourself of what you are good at

Interact with people

Establish reciprocal relationships
 Adapt to the culture to make relationships and learn the language
 Participate as fully as possible in the culture
 Listen to other learners talk with native speakers
 Listen to people talking to each other in their language
 Talk with children and listen to parents talking to their children
 Make a culture-friend who will tell you when you act or speak inappropriately
 Try to find a pen pal
 Look for people who have time to talk with you
 Find good language role models
 Listen to people of different regions and social status
 Make friends with some monolingual speakers
 Find people who speak clearly
 Show your interest in the language and culture
 Learn appropriate varieties of the language
 Ask for help and you will learn as well as make friends

Find ways to communicate

Use all your resources to communicate
 Coin words to help you communicate, but be careful
 Rehearse what you want to say ahead of time
 If you do not know a word, circumlocute
 Learn responses to keep the conversation going
 Use memorized phrases at the beginning to get people to talk to you
 Check out the meaning of words, before you add them to your active vocabulary
 Give and get feedback to check comprehension