What Everyone Should Know about Second Language Acquisition

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Six Major Points

1. What's in your head isn't necessarily what you think is there.
2. Practice isn't what it's cracked up to be.
3. Communication is distinct from mental representation.
4. You can't automatically blame the first language.
5. It isn't always about aptitude.
6. In the end, acquisition is too complex to reduce it to some simple ideas. There are no "shortcuts."

Point #1

What's in your head isn't necessarily what you think is there.

- Let's take a quick test. "Re" can be added to verbs to mean "do again" (e.g., *rerecord, remake*). Which of the following sentences are possible in English?
  - Barack didn't like the color of the walls so he repainted the office.
  - Michelle ripped up the parquet in order to resurface the floor.
  - *Malia was tired when she woke up so she reslept a bit.
  - *Sasha petted the dog, and when it wagged its tail she repetted it.

- So, what's the "rule" for the use of *re-*?

Point #1

- Here's another. You've probably learned that "ain't" isn't good English and that double negatives are out. Tell me which of the following sounds better to you.
  - I ain't got none.
  - *I ain't have any.

- What's the "rule" for the correct use of "ain't"?

Point #1

- One final test. Which of the following are permissible sentences in English?
  - Does Bill study second language acquisition?
  - *Does study Bill second language acquisition?
  - *Studies Bill second language acquisition?

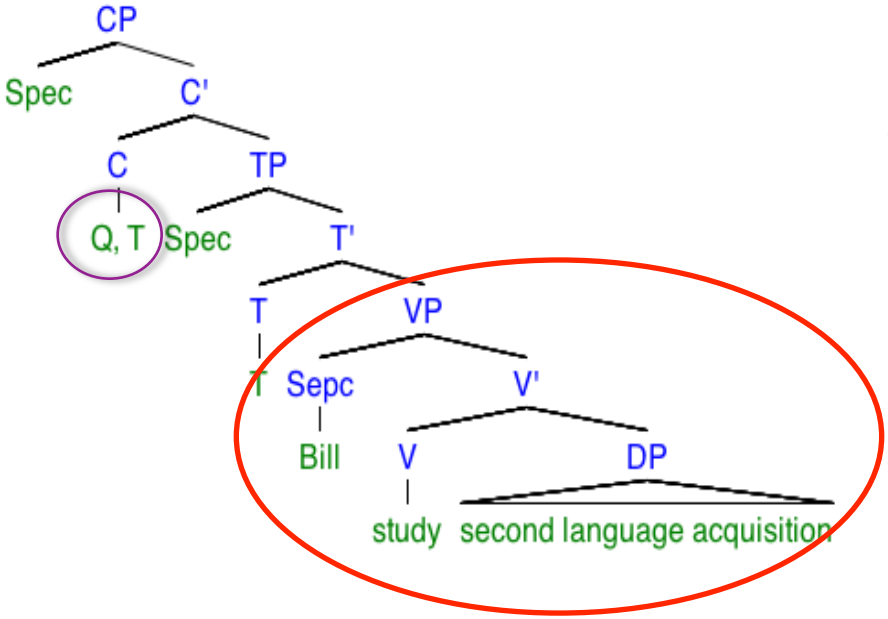
- So what's the "rule" for *yes/no* question formation in English and what about Spanish?
  - ¿Estudia Bill adquisición de lenguaje?
  - *¿Hace Bill estudiar adquisición de lenguaje?

Point #1

- What every speaker/knower of a language creates in the mind/brain, is an implicit, abstract representation of language. This abstract representation bears no resemblance to "rules" as we commonly talk about them, and it bears no resemblance to textbook grammatical rules.

- In short, there are no rules to be learned. So, what's in the head and how does it get there? Let's look at *yes/no* questions.

Point #1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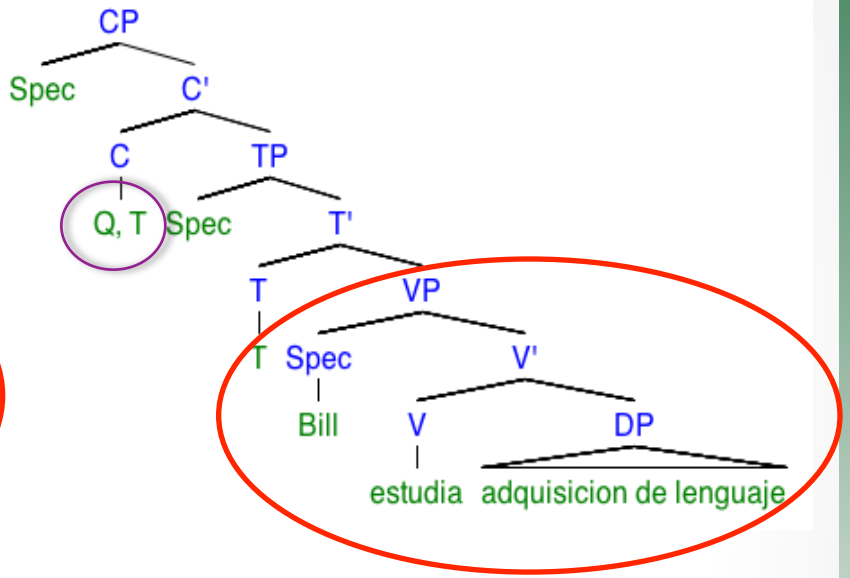
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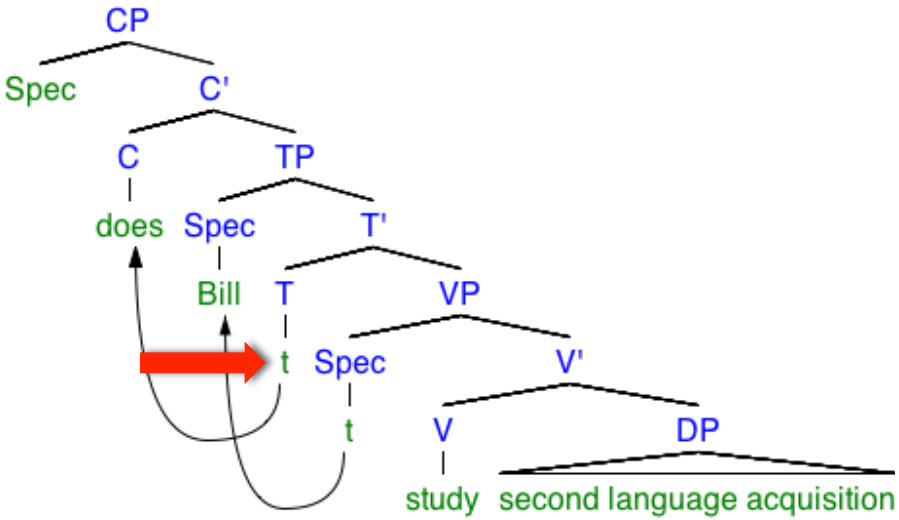
Point #1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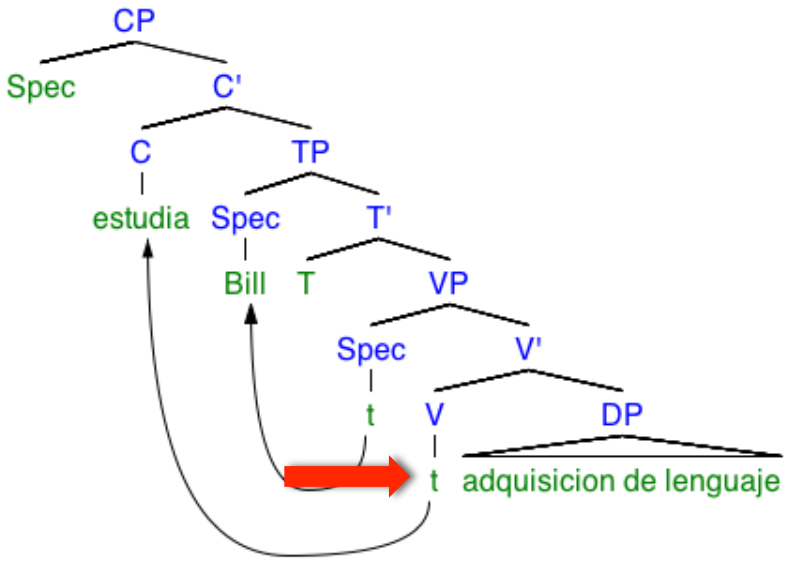
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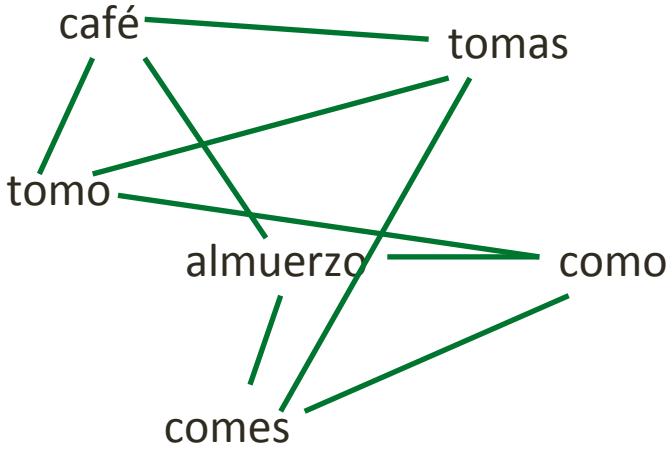
Point #1

- So, what people have in their heads are not rules per se but an abstract system consisting of features and operations that are used to satisfy features, plus constraints on how those operations can happen. Much of grammatical information is stored in lexical entries.
  - *does:* <Q>, <T> <+V> <-N> <+present> <-past> <3rd person> <sing>
  - *do:* <Q>, <T> <+V> <-N>
  - *did*: <Q> <T> <+V> <-N> <-present> <+past>
  - *studies:* <meaning> <+present> <-past> <3rd person> <sing>
  - *estudia:* <meaning> <Q>, <T> <+V> <-N> <+present> <-past> <3rd person> <sing>
  - *estudias*: < meaning> <Q>, <T> <+V> <-N> <+present> <-past> <2rd person> <sing>

Point #1

- This scenario also questions the reality of paradigms for verbs, declensions, and so on. What do people have in their heads for such things?

- A vast interconnected network of words along with their meanings, inflections, and grammatical information.



Point #1

- So, what people have in their heads is
  1. an abstract system that governs not only what is possible in a language, *but what is not possible;*
  2. a network of lexical entries that encode both meaning and grammatical information.

- There are no rules or paradigms in the classic or traditional sense. (Caveat: not all scholars view language this way, but most would say that there are no rules in the classic or traditional sense.)

- How does this mental representation get there?

Point #2

Practice isn't what it's cracked up to be.

- Does this look familiar to you? (from a 2010 college-level text)
- "Restate the question using inversion."
  1. Est-ce que vous parlez espagnol?
  2. Est-ce qu'il étudie à Paris?
  3. Est-ce qu'ils voyagent avec des amis?
  4. Est-ce que tu aimes les cours de langues?

- What does the above suggest about language learning to teachers and students?

Point #2

- After four decades of L2 research, what has become crystal clear is that language in the mind/brain is not built up from practice but from…
- …consistent and constant exposure to input. What's input?

- Input is language that learners hear (or read) in some communicative context. It is language that learners respond to for its meaning; not for its form or structure.

- Input is indispensable in language acquisition. There are no shortcuts. That is, practice is not a substitute for exposure to input.

Point #2

- Does the indispensability of input mean that input guarantees acquisition? No. In fact, non-nativeness in SLA is the norm.

- What the indispensability of input means is that real acquisition does not happen in its absence. Traditional "practice" may result in language-like behavior, but not acquisition.

- Keep in mind we are referring here to the acquisition of a mental representation, which is essential for acquisition.

Point #2

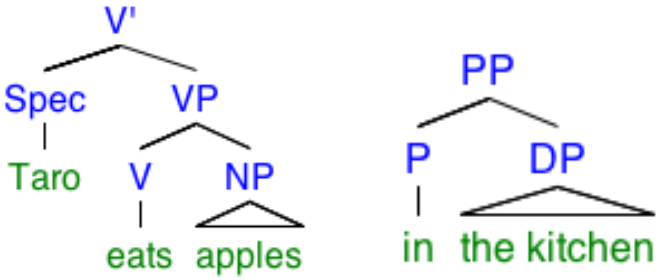
- Almost every aspect of language is acquired through interaction with input. Syntax, phonology, morphology, lexicon, pragmatics, and so on. Any exceptions?

- One exception are those aspects of language that are universal and built in prior to exposure. These are universal features and constraints on language that all languages must obey.
  - Example: sentences have underlying hierarchical structure, consisting of phrases. These phrases in turn require a head and a complement.
    - noun phrase = noun (head) + complement *professor of linguistics*
    - verb phrase = verb (head) + complement *teaches linguistics*
    - prepositional phrase = preposition (head) + complement *at MSU*

Point #2

- So, learners don't need input to know that languages is hierarchical and consists of phrases. This comes automatically because such information is "built in" to the universal properties of languages ("Universal Grammar").
- But they do need input to know which of the two variations for languages corresponds to the language they are learning.
  - Example: English is head initial; Japanese is head final

ENGLISH



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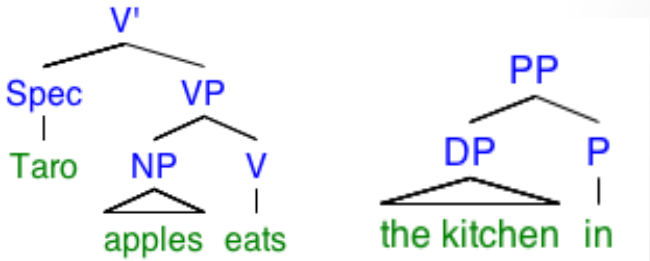

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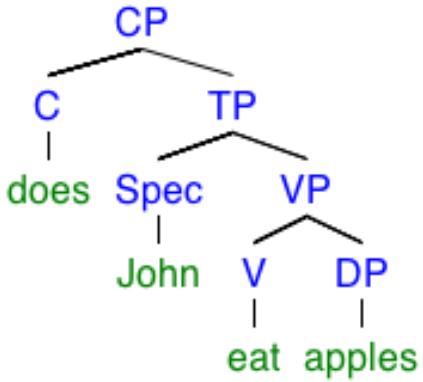
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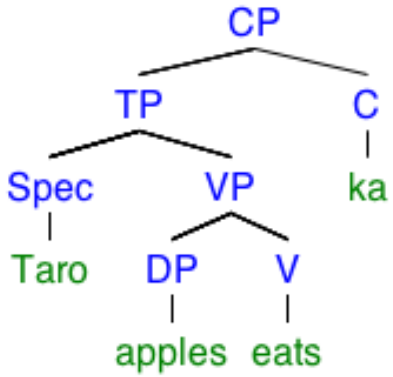
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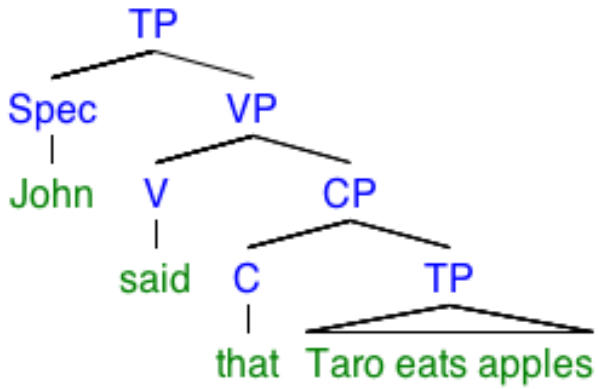
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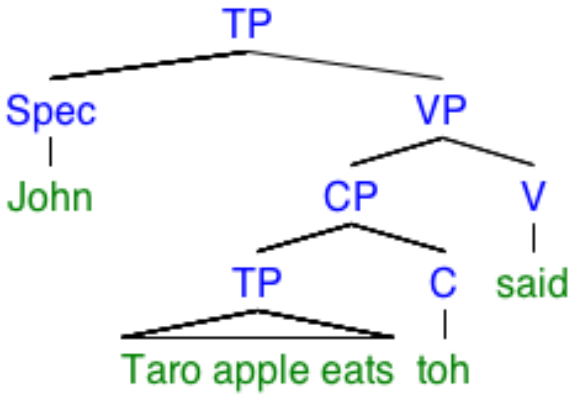
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Point #2

- These “parametric variations” are set based on input data. But note that learners do not need exposure to all of the input to set a new parameter. Example: recent study on Japanese L2.

- After exposure to just 100 SOV sentences in Japanese (e.g., Taro apple eats), our subjects demonstrated sensitivity to violations of word order they hadn’t been exposed to:
  - Ka Taro apple eats?/ Taro apple eats ka?
  - Mishu Taro apple eats toh said/Mishu toh Taro apple eats.

- In short, they’d reset the phrase word order parameter even though they’d only had exposure to basic sentences.

Point #2

- From VanPatten and Rothman (2013)
  - *Learners do not acquire rules from the input. Instead, learners process surface morpho-phonological units (e.g., lexical form, morphological form) and internalize these units along with underlying features or specifications. These units interact with information provided by [Universal Grammar] and the language making mechanisms of the human language faculty such that anything that resembles rules (from an outside perspective) evolves over time*

Point #2

- What else do we know about input and the development of mental representation?
  - Some aspects of the the representation are “triggered” rather soon.
  - Some take longer.
  - Stuff like lexicon (words and everything they contain), morphology (inflections, and so on), phonology, and other aspects take a long time.
  - There is staged development over time, which we will get to later.

Point #2

- So, if input is so important, what does traditional practice do?
- Essentially, very little if anything. It does not help mental representation. It is not clear it helps skill, which we will touch on later.

Point #3

Communication is distinct from mental representation.

- Let's begin with a definition. Working with someone next to you, complete the following definition: "Communication is…"

- Communication is *the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning in a given context.*
  - meaning = information, propositional content, intent
  - expression = production
  - interpretation = comprehension
  - context = participants, setting, purpose
  - negotiation = clarification, confirmation, co-construction of discourse

Point #3

- How is communication context-dependent?

- [talking with his best friend at lunch]
  - Jake: Hey. Here's a question only you can answer.
  - Friend: Shoot.

- [in a political science class]
  - Jake [raising his hand]: Excuse me, Professor. I have a question.
  - Professor: Go ahead, Jake.

- [with his romantic partner while watching a dvd at home]
  - Jake [leaning in close, lowering his voice]: I have to ask you something.
  - Partner: Hmmmm?

Point #3

- Note that although context influences how people use language to communicate, context does not influence the nature of language itself. For example, the syntax of English is still the syntax of English no matter who Jake communicates to with English.
  - Jake does not switch from SVO to SOV depending on context.
  - Jake does not switch from an inflectionally weak English to an inflectionally strong English depending on context.
  - Jake does not switch from English's 11 vowels to only 5 vowels depending on context.

- In short, mental representation does not change because of context.

Point #3

- So, communication makes use of mental representation during language use.
- How does communication develop?
- Communication develops only through acts of communication. That is, learners learn to communicate by engaging in contextualized acts of expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning.
  - Communication does not develop because of practice of language.
  - “transfer appropriate behavior”

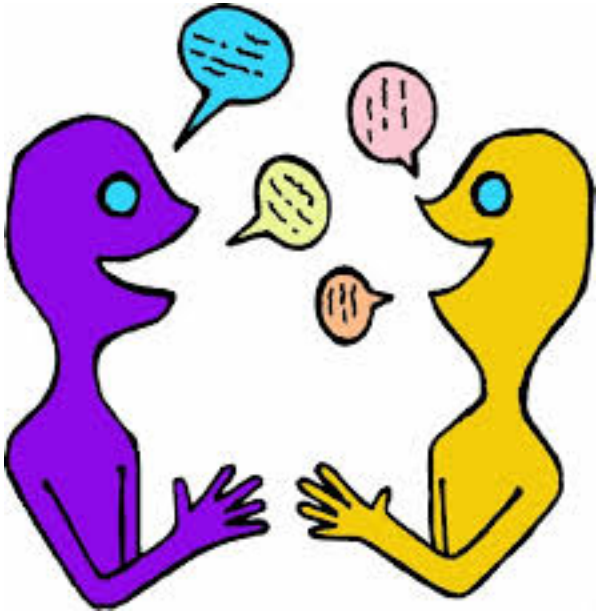
Point #3

- Note that classrooms are fixed contexts for communication:
  - setting is always the same
  - participants are always the same

- Role play and “acting” do not obviate the constraints on classroom context. That is, role play and acting are not communicative in the sense it is used here.

Point #3

- Interestingly, underlying mental representation may grow during communicative interactions? Why? Because part of interactions includes “interpretation of meaning.”
  - Interpretation of meaning implies input as previously defined.



Point #4

Don't automatically blame the first language.

- Is the following first language interference?
  - *Je suis vingt ans/ Yo soy veinte años*. = I'm twenty (years old).

- There's a difference between the first language influencing development (mental representation over time) and the first language influencing communication (strategies for getting an idea across).

- Let's look at development.

Point #4

- It's a well-known fact now that learners of languages go through transitional stages of development that are similar to all learners regardless of their first language. Example from English negation.
  - Stage 1: *no* + X, 'no drink beer'
  - Stage 2: S + *no* + X, 'I no drink beer'
  - Stage 3: *don't* alternates with *no*, 'He no/don't drink beer'
  - Stage 4: emergence of modals, 'I can't drink beer'
  - Stage 5: emergence of analyzed *do*, 'He doesn't drink beer'

- Not only does the L1 not alter these stages, instruction does not alter these stages either.

Point #4

- It's a well known fact that leaners of languages acquire particular inflections and morphemes over time in a certain order regardless of their first language. Example from English verbal inflections:

  -ing (He walking)

  ↓

  -ed (He walked)

  ↓

  -s (He walks)

- Not only does the L1 not alter this order of acquisition, instruction does not alter the order either.

Point #4

- To be sure, there may be first language influence in terms of how long it takes to move from one stage to another.
  - Stage 1: *no* + X, no drink beer (Spanish/Mandarin vs. French)
  - Stage 2: S + *no* + X, I no drink beer (Spanish/Mandarin vs. French)
  - Stage 3: don't alternates with no, He no/don't drink beer

- But the L1 is not responsible for the creation of stages nor for what those stages look like.

Point #4

- There is some evidence that the L1 may affect very subtle properties of language, what are called “interfaces” between components of language. At the same time, some of these properties are also those that take a very long time to learn in the L1 situation.
  - Juan vio a Roberto después que regresó de Francia.
  - Juan vio a Roberto después que él regresó de Francia.
  - Question: Who returned from France? Robert or John?

- In sum, the influence of the L1 seems to be…
  - selective;
  - subtle.

- Many “mistakes” teachers point to are not L1 influence in learning but the result of a production strategy.

Point #4

- The one area where we do see consistent problems in L1 is the development of phonology (the sound system) and pronunciation (how sounds are realized when spoken).

Point #6

In the end, acquisition is too complex of an endeavor to reduce it to some simple ideas.

- With someone else, decide whether you've said the following or heard someone else say it.
  - "Theory and all that is nice but I don't have the luxury or time. So, I need to teach students grammar (and vocabulary) so they get it."

Point #6

- What does this kind of statement reveal?
  - That the person believes there are shortcuts, or some way to get around the basic and natural processes involved in acquisition.
  - That there are rules to be learned and those rules are found in textbooks.

- But there are no shortcuts. Acquisition is too complex to reduce it to something simple.
- But there are no rules to be learned as such.

- Let's look at the complex endeavor of acquisition.

Point #6

- At any given point in time, what is building up in a learner's mind/brain? Simultaneously…
  - lexicon and morphology
  - phonology
  - syntactic features and constraints
  - pragmatics and discourse
  - interfaces between various components
  - communicative competence
  - skill
  - ??

- Again, these happen all at once. They are almost impossible to isolate and practice one at a time because they don't operate one at a time.

Point #6

- What about the processes?
  - input processing: getting appropriate data from the environment
  - restructuring: the workings of the internal language making mechanisms
  - output processing: linearization of words in real time speech production

- What about the context?
  - how much communicative language is the learner exposed to?
  - what demands are made on the learner at a given time?
  - what incentivizes the learner to actually acquire (not explicitly learn) language?

Concluding Remarks

- The field of L2 research is multifaceted and filled with information not contained here.
- Much of the research is irrelevant to language teaching.
- Yet, L2 research provides us with some important insights regarding constraints on language instruction.
- To be an instructor of language is to know, to the greatest degree possible, the nature of language and the nature of language acquisition.

Daddy, are you coming home now?

Read More About it

- Lee, J. F. & VanPatten, B. (2003). *Making communicative language teaching happen.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
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- VanPatten, B. & Benati, A. (2015). *Key terms in second language acquisition.* 2nd edition. London: Bloomsbury Press.
- VanPatten, B. & Rothman, J. (2013). Against "Rules." In A. Benati, C. Lavale, & M. Arche (Eds.), *The grammar dimension in instructed second language acquisition*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.