

Unit 10 Exposure and focus on form

What are exposure and focus on form?

Across the centuries people have studied how foreign languages are learnt. Many experts now believe that one way we learn a foreign language is by **exposure** to it, i.e. by hearing and/or reading it all around us and without studying it. They say we then **pick it up** automatically, i.e. learn it without realising. This is the main way that children learn their first language.

Experts also say that to learn a foreign language, particularly as adults, exposure to language is not enough. We also need to **focus** our attention **on the form** of the foreign language, i.e. on how it is pronounced or written, on how its grammar is formed and used, and on the form and meaning of vocabulary. They say we need to use language to interact and communicate, too.

Key concepts

Have you learnt English more successfully from formal study or just by picking it up?

Research has identified three main ways in which we learn a foreign language. Firstly, experts talk of us **acquiring** language. This means the same as **picking it up**. They say that to really learn a foreign language we need exposure to lots of examples of it, and that we learn from the language in our surroundings. We need to hear and read lots of language which is rich in variety, interesting to us and just difficult enough for us, i.e. just beyond our level, but not too difficult. **Acquisition** takes place over a period of time, i.e. not instantly, and we listen to and read items of language for a long time before we begin to use them (a **silent period**).

Secondly, to learn language we need to use it in **interaction** with other people. We need to use language to express ourselves and make our meanings clear to other people, and to understand them. The person we are talking to will show us, directly or indirectly, if they have understood us or not. If they have not, we need to try again, using other language, until we manage to communicate successfully.

Thirdly, research shows that foreign language learners also need to focus on form. This means that they need to pay attention to language, e.g. by identifying, working with and practising the language they need to communicate.

Nowadays, experts generally agree that we do not learn a foreign language best through learning grammar and translating (the **grammar-translation method**). Nor do we learn by constantly practising until we form habits (the behaviourist or structuralist approach) or just by communicating (the **communicative approach**). We learn by picking up language, interacting and communicating and focusing on form. But the research still continues, and we do not yet fully understand how foreign languages are learnt.

Module 1

■ Key concepts and the language teaching classroom

- To acquire language, learners should hear and read a wide variety of language at the right level for them. They need exposure to language both inside and outside the classroom.
- Learners need time to acquire language. They may need a silent period before they can produce new language and we cannot expect them to learn things immediately. Learning language is a gradual process.
- Learners need to use language in the classroom to interact with classmates or the teacher. This gives them the opportunity to experiment with language and find out how successful their communication is.
- Learners need opportunities to focus on forms of language they have read or listened to in texts or used in tasks. The teacher can help them to notice certain points about language, think about their use and practise them.
- But we need to remember that some learners may like to learn and/or are used to learning in particular ways. Teachers always need to match their teaching to the characteristics and needs of the learner.

See Units 12, 13 and 14 for the different characteristics and needs of learners and Unit 16 for ways of focusing on and practising language, and for examples of communicative tasks.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY (See page 172 for answers)

Put these classroom activities into the correct column in the table according to which way of learning they encourage most. (Some may go into more than one column.)

Acquisition	Interaction	Focus on form

- 1 The learners listen to the teacher read a story.
- 2 The learners do an oral pairwork task about choosing a birthday present for someone.
- 3 The learners underline examples of the past simple tense in a text.
- 4 A learner asks the teacher what the English word for ... is.
- 5 The teacher corrects a learner's pronunciation of a word.
- 6 The learners categorise words in a list into different lexical sets.
- 7 A group of learners research a topic and then present their results to the rest of the class.
- 8 A role-play in which one learner gives another advice about a problem on a cue card.
- 9 While the learners have a class discussion, the teacher listens and tells them new words when they don't know them but need to use them.
- 10 The learners write sentences each containing an example of the new structure they have just been taught