Moving Beyond the Plateau

From Intermediate to Advanced Levels in Language Learning

Jack C. Richards

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Introduction

In this booklet, we will examine some of the typical problems second-language learners often encounter when they move from the lower-intermediate to the upper-intermediate/advanced level of language proficiency. In particular, we will explore the problems learners seeking to make this transition sometimes encounter – the fact that they appear to have reached a plateau in their language learning and do not perceive that they are making further progress. We will explore some of the features of this apparent language-learning plateau and suggest strategies to help learners overcome this problem.

As they move from the basic to intermediate to advanced levels in their language proficiency, many second- or foreign-language learners will confirm that language learning does not always follow a smooth progression. There are times when progress seems to be marked and noticeable, as for example, with many basic-level language learners. After their first 200 or so hours of instruction, they begin to break through the threshold of learning to become real users of the language, even if at a fairly simple level. Those who have experienced the transition to this level of learning recall the feelings of satisfaction and achievement that came as they found themselves actually capable of real communication in English. Reaching this level of learning, however, is no simple matter. Acquiring a usable supply of essential and high-frequency vocabulary does not come easily, nor does the ability to recall and use the correct grammar and conversational patterns at the appropriate times and to understand the gist and sometimes the details of the language learners hear.

However, once learners have arrived at an intermediate level of language learning, progress does not always appear to be so marked, and making the transition from intermediate to the upper-intermediate/advanced level sometimes proves frustrating. Some may feel they have arrived at a plateau and making further progress seems elusive, despite the amount of time and effort they devote to it.

The Chinese scholar, Fan Yi (2007), described the phenomenon in the following way:

> *An EFL learner of average intelligence usually does not have much difficulty in the early stage of learning. Because of curiosity and the assumption that he or she can make an immediate use of what he or she is learning to communicate with English-speaking people, the learner is highly motivated at the early stages of learning. The learner imitates, memorizes and practices all the input from the teacher and the textbook.*

Though mechanically to a great extent, he or she does try hard to learn. On the other hand, as all the input of the English language is absolutely new to the learner, it is stimulating and easy to remember. When stimuli are new to the learner, the learner is more motivated to learn and memorize them. So most EFL learners can have a good start in learning no matter what teaching approaches are used.

However, as the learning process goes on, the learner finds it harder and harder to take in new language data. The teacher also finds that his input, no matter how much he or she tries to make it interesting, is no longer as easily taken in by the learners as it used to be. The students are more and more discouraged by the fact that their ambition of mastering English as a means of communication turns out to be a false assumption. They find that they know a lot about the English language, but they can hardly say they know English. It is during this period of time that many EFL learners suffer great anxiety and eventually give up their efforts to learn the English language. Later on, for one reason or other, they have to start learning English again. They soon meet the same problem. As this circle rolls over again and again, they fail to be able to acquire a real competence to communicate by means of English, even if they may have studied English for more than ten years.

Inevitably, learners who have reached the upper-intermediate level will have somewhat different language use profiles and learning needs, but the following problems are often encountered:

1. ***There is a gap between receptive and productive competence.***
   Learners may have made considerable progress in listening comprehension and reading, but still feel inadequate when it comes to speaking skills.

2. ***Fluency may have progressed at the expense of complexity.***
   Learners may make primary use of lower-level grammar, as well as vocabulary and communication strategies to express their meaning and may not have acquired more sophisticated language patterns and usage characteristics of more advanced second-language users.

3. ***Learners have a limited vocabulary range.***
   Vocabulary development has not progressed sufficiently. Learners tend to overuse lower-level vocabulary and fail to acquire more advanced vocabulary and usage.

4. ***Language production may be adequate but often lacks the characteristics of natural speech.***
   Learners' English may be fluent and grammatical but sounds too formal or too bookish.

5. ***There are persistent, fossilized language errors.***
   Errors that are typical of lower-level learners reappear in certain circumstances despite the amount of time and effort devoted to correcting them.

Let us explore each of these features in more detail.

1 *There is a gap between receptive and productive competence*

Key characteristics

- While learners' receptive competence continues to develop, their productive competence remains relatively static.
- Language items that learners recognize and understand in the input they hear do not pass into their productive competence.

All language users have greater receptive competence (language they can understand) than productive competence (language they can produce). I can read great novels for example, but I could never write one. Traditionally, in language teaching we recognize this fact in the distinction between active and passive language knowledge, particularly in relation to vocabulary learning, where it is normally assumed that learners should be able to understand far more words than they can use. And it has generally been accepted that in second-language learning, new items first become part of learners' receptive competence before becoming part of their productive competence.

Krashen (1982) proposed that in language teaching, more effort should be devoted to developing learners' receptive competence than their productive competence. He claimed that learners' productive ability will arise naturally from receptive knowledge. In particular, Krashen stressed that meaningful comprehension rather than focused production is all that is needed to facilitate language learning.

However, this is not always confirmed in the experience of learners, who often find that their productive skills are well below the level they would like them to be, despite reasonably good comprehension skills. Learners may be unable to apply their language knowledge in actual use, hence their linguistic knowledge at the cognitive level is not utilized during performance. As Fan Yi (2007) points out, a consequence is that learners' feelings of anxiety or frustration may increase. They may eventually lose confidence and determination, and their motivation to continue learning English may be affected.

Recent theories of second-language acquisition, however, no longer assume that productive skills will arise naturally from comprehension skills. Two other factors are necessary if we are to reduce the gap between receptive and productive competence: ***noticing*** (the noticing hypothesis), and ***focused output*** (the output hypothesis).

The noticing hypothesis:

Richard Schmidt has drawn attention to the role of consciousness in language learning, and in particular to the role of *noticing* in learning. Schmidt (1986, 1990) proposed that for learners to acquire new forms from input (language they hear), it is necessary for them to notice such forms in the input. His argument is that we won't learn anything from input we hear and understand unless we notice something about the input. Consciousness of features of the input can serve as a trigger, which activates the first stage in the process of incorporating new linguistic features into language competence. As Slobin (1985) remarked of first-language learning:

> The only linguistic materials that can figure in language-making are stretches of speech that attract the child's attention to a sufficient degree to be noticed and held in memory (p. 1164).

Schmidt (1990) further clarifies this point in distinguishing between *input* (what learners hear) and *intake* (that part of the input that learners notice). Only intake can serve as the basis for language development. In his own study of his acquisition of Portuguese (Schmidt and Frota, 1986), Schmidt found that there was a close connection between noticing features of the input and their later emergence in his own speech. Schmidt lists the following features as likely to contribute to the extent to which learners will notice features of input:

- Frequency of encounter with items
- Perceptual saliency of items
- Instructional strategies that can focus learners' attention
- Individual processing ability (which is related to learners' aptitude for language learning)
- Task demands, or the nature of the activity learners are taking part in (p. 139)

In teaching listening and speaking skills, for example, noticing activities can involve returning to the listening texts that served as the basis for comprehension activities and using them as the basis for language awareness. For example, students can listen again to a recording in order to:

- Identify differences between what they hear and a printed version of the text
- Complete a cloze version of the text
- Complete sentence stems taken from the text
- Check off from a list the expressions that occurred in the text

Learners can then practice using some of the forms that they noticed.

The output hypothesis:

Swain (1985, 2000) proposed that successful language acquisition requires not only comprehensible input, but also comprehensible output: That is, language produced by the learners that can be understood by other speakers of the language. Swain suggested that when learners have to make efforts to ensure that their messages are communicated (which she refers to as "pushed output") this puts them in a better position to notice the gap between their productions and those of proficient speakers, thus fostering second-language development. Carefully structured and managed output (the output hypothesis) is essential if learners are to acquire new language. Managed output here refers to tasks and activities that require the use of certain target-language forms that "stretch" learners' language knowledge and that consequently require a "restructuring" of that knowledge. The output hypothesis suggests the rather obvious notion that practice in using target language forms is necessary for learners to acquire new target language. Swain and Lapkin (1995: summarized in Saville-Troike 2006) suggest that meaningful production practice helps learners by:

- Enhancing fluency by furthering development of automaticity through practice.
- Highlighting gaps in their own knowledge as they are forced to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing, which may lead them to give more attention to relevant information.
- Testing hypotheses based on developing proficiency, allowing for monitoring and revision.
- Getting learners to talk about language, including eliciting relevant input and collaboratively solving problems.

When teaching listening skills, for example, output-based activities can consist of oral or written tasks that involve productive use of selected items from a listening text. Such activities could include:

- In the case of conversational texts, pair reading of the tape scripts.
- Written sentence-completion tasks requiring use of expressions and other linguistic items that occurred in the texts.
- Dialog practice based on dialogs that incorporate items from the text.
- Role plays in which students are required to use key language from the texts.

2 | *Fluency may have progressed at the expense of complexity*

Key characteristics

- Learners' language may be both relatively fluent and accurate but shows little evidence of appropriate grammatical development.
- Complexity of learners' language does not match their proficiency level.

A common distinction in language teaching is between fluency and accuracy. Fluency describes a level of proficiency in communication, which includes:

- The ability to produce language with ease.
- The ability to speak with a good, but not necessarily perfect command of intonation, vocabulary, syntax, and grammar.
- The ability to express ideas coherently.
- The ability to produce continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties, with minimum breakdowns and disruptions.

However, there is an additional important dimension in language development, and that is the degree of *complexity* of the language learners have acquired. The development of fluency may mean greater ease of use of known language forms, but it does not necessarily imply development in complexity. Skehan (1998) argues that fluency, accuracy, and complexity ideally develop in harmony, but this is not always the case. In order for learners' language to complexify, new linguistic forms have to be acquired and added to their productive linguistic repertoire. This was referred to in the output hypothesis section on page 6 as *restructuring*.

VanPatten (1993) suggests:

[that restructuring involves processes] . . . that mediate the incorporation of intake into the developing system. Since the internalization of intake is not a mere accumulation of discrete bits of data, data have to "fit in" in some way and sometimes the accommodation of a particular set of data causes changes in the rest of the system. In some cases, the data may not fit in at all and are not accommodated by the system. They simply do not make it into the long-term store (p. 436).

For example, if learners have mastered the present and past tenses and are comfortable using them, once they encounter the perfect tense, their linguistic system has to be revised to accommodate new distinctions communicated by the perfect. There may be a time when learners overuse the known forms (present and past) until their systems have restructured to incorporate the perfect. But as VanPatten remarks, sometimes this restructuring may not occur, and the newly encountered form will not pass into learners' linguistic systems. For learners' linguistic systems to take on new and more complex linguistic items, the restructuring, or reorganization, of mental representations is required, as well as opportunities to practice these new forms (the output hypothesis).

Ways of increasing the opportunities for restructuring to take place can occur at three different stages during an activity: *prior to the activity, during the activity,* or *after completing an activity.* In each case, a language focus is provided in an attempt to support the learning of more complex language items.

Addressing language prior to the activity

Here, there are two goals: to provide language support that can be used in completing a task, and to clarify the nature of the task so that students can give less attention to procedural aspects of the task and hence monitor their language use during their performance. Skehan notes (1996), "Pre-task activities can aim to teach or mobilize, or make salient language which will be relevant to task performance" (p. 53). This can be accomplished in several ways:

- *By pre-teaching certain linguistic forms that can be used while completing a task.*
  For example, prior to completing a role play task that practices calling an apartment owner to discuss renting an apartment, students can first read advertisements for apartments and learn key vocabulary they will use in the role play. They could also listen to and practice a dialog in which a prospective tenant calls an apartment owner for information. The dialog serves both to display different questioning strategies and to model the kind of task the students will perform.

- *By reducing the cognitive complexity of the activity.*
  If an activity is difficult to carry out, learners' attention may be diverted to the structure and management of the task, leaving little opportunity for them to monitor the language they use on the task. One way of reducing the cognitive complexity of the activity is to provide students with a chance for rehearsal. This is intended to ease the processing load that learners will encounter when actually doing a task. This could be achieved by watching a video or listening to a recording of learners doing a task similar to

the target task, or it could be a simplified version of the activity the learners will carry out. Dialog work prior to carrying out the role play serves a similar function.

- *By giving time to plan the activity.*
  Time allocated to planning prior to carrying out an activity can likewise provide learners with schemata, vocabulary, and language forms that they can call upon while completing the task. Planning activities include vocabulary-generating activities such as brainstorming, or strategy activities in which learners consider a range of approaches to solving a problem, discuss their pros and cons, and then select which they will apply to the task.

Addressing language during an activity

A focus on language can be facilitated during the completion of an activity by choosing how the activity is to be carried out. The way an activity is implemented can determine whether it is carried out fluently with a focus on target language forms, or disfluently with excessive dependence on communication strategies, employment of lexicalized rather than grammaticalized discourse, and overuse of ellipsis and non-linguistic resources. Task implementation factors include:

- *Participation:* Whether the activity is completed individually or with other learners.
- *Resources:* The materials and other resources provided for the learners to use while completing an activity.
- *Procedures:* The number of procedures involved in completing an activity.
- *Order:* The sequencing of an activity in relation to previous tasks.
- *Product:* The outcome or outcomes students produce, such as a written or oral product.

Participation

The effect of participation arrangements on task performance has been noted by several scholars. Foster (1998) found that having students work together in dyads rather than in groups coupled with the obligation to exchange information, is the best for language production, negotiations, and modified output (p. 18).

Resources

Resources that students work with can also affect task performance. The use of pictures in a story-telling activity might provide an accessible framework,

or schema, for the story, clarifying such elements as setting, characters, events, outcomes, and so on, giving learners more opportunity to focus their planning or performance on other dimensions of the task. Or, in conducting a survey task, the design of the resources that students use could have a crucial impact on the appropriateness of the language used in carrying out the task. If the survey form or questionnaire students use provides models of the types of questions they should ask, it may result in a better level of language use during questioning and make other aspects of the task easier, since less planning will be needed to formulate appropriate questions.

Procedures

Procedures used in completing an activity can also be used to influence language output. An activity that is divided into several shorter subtasks may be more manageable than one without such a structure, allowing students to deal with one section of the task at a time.

Order

The order of an activity in relation to other tasks may influence the use of target structures. For example, if students are to carry out an activity that requires the use of sequence markers (e.g., *first*, *then*, *finally*), a prior activity that models how sequence markers are used may increase use of those sequence markers during the performance of the target task (see Swain, 1998).

Product

The product focus of an activity will also influence the extent to which students have the opportunity to attend to linguistic form. A task may be completed orally, it may be recorded, or it may require writing. In each case, different opportunities for language awareness and production are involved. Swain (1999) describes how tasks with a written product provide an opportunity for students to focus on form.

> *Students, working together in pairs, are each given a different set of numbered pictures that tell a story. Together the pair of students must jointly construct the story-line. After they have worked out what the story is, they write it down. In so doing, students encounter linguistic problems they need to solve to continue with the task. These problems include how best to say what they want to say; problems of lexical choice; which morphological endings to use; the best syntactic structures to use; and problems about the language needed to sequence the story correctly. These problems arise as the students try to "make meaning", that is, as they construct and write out the story, as they understand it. And as they encounter these linguistic problems, they focus on linguistic form –*

> *the form that is needed to express the meaning in the way they want to convey it (p. 3).*

Learners can also record their performance of an activity and then listen to it to identify aspects of their performance that require modification.

Addressing language use after the activity

Grammatical appropriateness can also be addressed after a task has been completed (see Willis and Willis, 1966). Activities of this type include the following:

Public performance

After completing a small-group activity, students carry out the same task in front of the class or another group. This may prompt them to perform the activity using more complex language. Aspects of their performances that were not initially in focus during in-group performance can become conscious as there is an increased capacity for self-monitoring during public performance of the activity.

Repeat performance

The same activity might be repeated with some elements modified, such as the amount of time available. Nation (1989), for example, reports improvements in fluency, control of content, and to a lesser extent, accuracy, when learners repeat an oral task under time constraints, and argues that this is a way of bringing about long-term improvement in both fluency, and to some extent, accuracy.

Other performance

The students might listen to more advanced learners (or even native speakers) completing the same task, and focus on some of the linguistic and communicative resources employed in the process. In other words, they can carry out noticing activities while listening to examples of other performances.

3 | *Learners have a limited vocabulary range*

Key characteristics

- ■ Learners' vocabulary development is still at the 3,000-word level.
- ■ Learners lack knowledge of collocational patterns.

Vocabulary development plays a vital role in making the transition from an intermediate to a more advanced level of language proficiency, but many learners appear to have reached a learning plateau in relation to vocabulary. This may be seen in the overuse of lower-level vocabulary and failure to acquire more advanced-level vocabulary, as well as limited awareness of collocational usage. In terms of the quantitative dimension of vocabulary learning, vocabulary development can be thought of as involving acquisition of a core vocabulary that is common to many different domains, genres, and text types. In addition, learners build up more specialized vocabulary related to their own needs and fields of interests, whether these be academic, occupational, or social. How big is this core vocabulary?

Researchers suggest that knowing a minimum vocabulary of 3,000 words is required to understand a high percentage of words on an average page of a text. This represents a target for the lower-intermediate learning level. Hu and Nation (1992) found that a vocabulary of 5,000 words was needed to read short, unsimplified novels for pleasure, while Hazenberg and Hulstijn (1996) found that twice as many words were needed to read first-year university materials.

In addition to this core vocabulary, there are another 1,000 or so words common to academic disciplines, sometimes referred to as the basis for an academic vocabulary. However, once learners reach the intermediate level, they often fail to make sufficient gains in their vocabulary knowledge. A study of college students' vocabulary development in China found that during their first two years of university study, English majors' vocabulary increased by 1,500 words on average each year; but in the later two years, their vocabulary increased on average by only 250 words each year (Fan Yi, 2007).

O'Keeffe et al. (2007) comment:

> *A receptive vocabulary of some 5,000 to 6,000 words would appear to be a good threshold at which to consider learners at the top of the intermediate level and ready to take on an advanced program. Such a program would ideally have the following aims:*

- *To increase the receptive vocabulary size to enable comprehension targets above 90% (e.g., up to 95%) for typical texts to be reached.*
- *To expose the learner to a range of vocabulary at frequency levels beyond the first 5,000-6,000 word band, but which is not too rare or obscure to be of little practical use.*
- *To inculcate the kinds of knowledge required for using words at this level, given their often highly specific lexical meanings and connotations.*
- *To train awareness, skills, and strategies that will help the learner become an independent vocabulary-learner and user who can continue the task for as long as (s)he desires" (p. 48-9).*

"Knowing a word" of course involves far more than simply recognizing its meaning. Gairns and Redman (1986; cited in Moras, 2007) include the following components of lexical competence:

- *Boundaries between conceptual meaning:* knowing not only what lexis refers to, but also where the boundaries are that separate it from words of related meaning (e.g., *cup*, *mug*, *bowl*).
- *Polysemy:* distinguishing between the various meanings of a single word form with several but closely related meanings (*head*: of a person, of a pin, of an organization).
- *Homonymy:* distinguishing between the various meanings of a single word form, which has several meanings that are NOT closely related (e.g., *a file*: used to put papers in or a tool).
- *Homophyny:* understanding words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings (e.g., *flour*, *flower*).
- *Synonymy:* distinguishing between the different shades of meaning that synonymous words have (e.g., *extend*, *increase*, *expand*).
- *Affective meaning:* distinguishing between the attitudinal and emotional factors (*denotation* and *connotation*), which depend on the speakers' attitudes or the situation. Socio-cultural associations of lexical items are another important factor.
- *Style, register, dialect:* Being able to distinguish between different levels of formality, the effect of different contexts and topics, as well as differences in geographical variation.
- *Translation:* awareness of certain differences and similarities between the native and the foreign language (e.g., false cognates).
- *Chunks of language:* multi-word verbs, idioms, collocations, and lexical phrases.

- *Grammar of vocabulary:* learning the rules that enable students to build up different forms of the word or even different words from that word (e.g., *sleep*, *slept*, *sleeping*; *able*, *unable*, *disability*).
- *Pronunciation:* ability to recognize and reproduce items in speech.

One of the key problems in helping learners improve their vocabulary is finding effective ways to help them remember words they have encountered. How can we help learners move words from short-term to long-term memory? One clue is from research on memory. Gairns and Redman (1986) point out that our mental lexicon is highly organized and efficient, and that items that are related semantically are stored together. This is why it is much easier to recall a list of words that are grouped or organized in a meaningful way, as compared with trying to recall a set of words that are simply organized alphabetically. Word frequency also plays a role, since the more frequently a word is encountered, the easier it is to remember.

Helping learners develop their own approaches to vocabulary learning is also an important goal at the advanced level, so that learners can deal with new words they encounter in independent learning. Moras (2007) recommends the use of guided discovery, contextual guesswork, and mastering dictionary use as effective teaching and learning strategies.

> *Guided discovery involves asking questions or offering examples that guide students to guess meanings correctly. In this way learners get involved in a process of semantic processing that helps learning and retention.*
>
> *Contextual guesswork means making use of the context in which the word appears to derive an idea of its meaning, or in some cases, guess from the word itself (i.e., those familiar with Latin-based words). Knowledge of word formation (e.g., prefixes and suffixes) can also help guide students to discover meaning. Teachers can help students with specific techniques and practice in contextual guesswork, for example, the understanding of discourse markers and identifying the function of the word in the sentence (e.g., verb, adjective, noun). The latter is also very useful when using dictionaries.*
>
> *Students should start using EFL dictionaries as early as possible, from Intermediate upwards. With adequate training, dictionaries are an invaluable tool for learners, giving them independence from the teacher. As well as understanding meaning, students are able to check pronunciation, the grammar of the word (e.g., verb patterns, verb forms, plurality, comparatives, etc.), different spelling (American versus British), style and register, as well as examples that illustrate usage.*

Another dimension of vocabulary development, which is essential if students are to make a successful transition to the advanced level, is to expand what has been called their *collocational competence. Collocation* refers to restrictions on how words can be used together, such as which prepositions are used with particular verbs, or which verbs and nouns are used together. Corpus analysis has allowed common collocational patterns in English to be easily identified (O'Keeffe et al., 2007). Knowledge of collocations is vital for effective language use, and a sentence that is grammatically correct will look or sound awkward if collocational preferences are not used. For example we can say "blond hair," but not "blond car"; "lean meat," but not "slim meat"; "perform a play," but not "perform a meeting." Vocabulary development does not only involve acquiring new words. It also involves expanding knowledge of the collocational patterns that known words can enter into.

O'Keeffe et al. (2007) comment:

One may conclude that collocations, along with semantically transparent and opaque, idiomatic chunks, form the main component of the multi-word lexicon and that the multi-word lexicon is at the heart of advanced level lexical knowledge, given that the challenge at this level is as much to do with grappling with observing recurrent collocations and chunks (which will most often consist of words already known individually) as it is with simply pushing for a (never-ending) linear increase in the vocabulary size based on single words never seen before (p. 53).

4 | *Language production may be adequate but often lacks the characteristics of natural speech*

Key characteristics

- Learners' spoken English may be accurate and fluent but not always sound natural.
- Learners' spoken English lacks appropriate use of chunks and formulaic utterances.

The goal for many language learners is to be able to communicate comprehensibly, effectively, and appropriately. For some, the goal may be to approximate as closely as possible the norms of native-speaker English. For others, this may not be a goal since they subscribe to the notion of English as an international language – English as it is used by people with no other common language and reflecting the cultural and linguistic identities of the people who use it. Despite learners' personal goals for learning English, many will want their English to sound both fluent and natural, even if spoken with an accent that reflects their mother tongue. Many learners achieve a high level of fluency, yet are told that their English often sounds unnatural. What gives language the quality of sounding natural?

Multi-word chunks

There are many factors that can contribute to the naturalness of speech. One important factor is the extent to which the learners are using what are sometimes called multi-word "chunks," as well as conversational routines or fixed expressions. Random patterns of words do not occur together in speech, but often occur as multi-word chunks. These may be two-, three-, four-, five-, or even six-word chunks.

O'Keeffe et al. (2007) give the following list of the most frequent six-word chunks that occur in the CANCODE corpus, a 5 million word corpus of spoken English:

rank	item
1	do you know what I mean
2	at the end of the day
3	and all the rest of it
4	and all that sort of thing
5	I don't know what it is

rank	item
6	but at the end of the
7	and this that and the other
8	from the point of view of
9	a hell of a lot of
10	in the middle of the night
11	do you want me to do
12	on the other side of the
13	I don't know what to do
14	and all this sort of thing
15	and at the end of the
16	if you see what I mean
17	do you want to have a
18	if you know what I mean

Conversational routines and fixed expressions

A marked feature of conversational discourse is also the use of a subset of the multi-word units – conversational routines – that often have specific functions in conversation and give conversational discourse the quality of naturalness (Nattinger, 1980). These perform a variety of functions in spoken English and the teaching of these and other multi-word units is a feature of some recent English courses such as the Cambridge University Press series, *Touchstone* (McCarthey et al., 2006). Hence, when learners use English, in order for their usage to sound natural, utterances need to be expressed in the way they are conventionally said in English, and this is something that is often not possible to predict. For example, why do we say when we meet someone for the first time, "Nice to meet you," and not "To meet you is nice"? Both have the same meaning but the former is said, not the latter. Our linguistic, or grammatical, competence provides the basis for creating many different ways of saying things, however only a small subset of possible utterances is ever actually said. Wardhaugh (cited in Richards, 1990) observes:

> *There are routines to help people establish themselves in certain positions: routines for taking off and hanging up coats; arrangements concerning where one is to sit or stand at a party or in a meeting; offers of hospitality, and so on. There are routines for beginnings and endings of conversations, for leading into topics, and for moving away from one topic to another. And there are routines for breaking up conversations, for leaving a party, and for dissolving a gathering . . . It is difficult to imagine how life could be lived without some routines.*

Consider the following routines. Where might they occur? What might their function be within those situations?

This one's on me.	I'll be making a move then.
It was lovely to see you.	I see what you mean.
Thanks for coming.	Let me think about it.
I don't believe a word of it.	Just looking, thanks.
I don't get the point.	I'll be with you in a minute.
You look great today.	It doesn't matter.
As I was saying . . .	

In a classic paper on lexical routines, Pawley and Syder (1983) suggest that native speakers have a repertoire of thousands of routines, or "chunks," like these. Their use in appropriate situations creates conversational discourse that sounds natural and native-like, so they have to be learned and used as fixed expressions. Research by Prodromou (cited in O'Keeffe et al., 2007) suggests that a key difference between the speech of advanced SUEs (successful users of English) and native speakers is the presence or absence of chunks. He also raises the issue of whether it is important or necessary for SUEs to set out to fully master the use of chunks, since they often mark membership of a cultural group (e.g., Americans) that learners may not wish to claim membership in. O'Keeffe et al., (2007) however, suggest that "students who *do* wish to push towards near-native fluency should be given appropriate exposure to and practice in the use of chunks" (p. 76).

Exposure to chunks can be achieved through:

- Observing examples of natural discourse and noticing patterns of usage that occur in them.
- Working with tasks and materials that highlight the use of multi-word units and conversational routines.
- Providing opportunities to practice using chunks.

5 | *There are persistent, fossilized language errors*

Key characteristics

- Errors of both grammar and pronunciation have become permanent features of learners' speech.
- Errors persist despite advances in learners' communicative skills.

Fossilization refers to the persistence of errors in learners' speech despite progress in other areas of language development (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). They are errors that appear to be entrenched and difficult to eradicate, despite the teacher's best efforts. Here are a few examples of fossilized errors from a fluent adult speaker of English in Hong Kong who uses English regularly and effectively, although often with a high frequency of what we might regard as basic grammatical and other errors.

I doesn't understand what she wanted.
He never ask me for help.
Last night I watch TV till 2 a.m.
Just I was talking to him.
She say she meeting me after work.

There has been a great deal written about the phenomenon of fossilization. Researchers have examined such issues as which aspects of language are more likely to become fossilized in learners, the kinds of learners who are likely to be affected by it, the kinds of fossilization that can occur, and so on. Some have linked fossilization to an over-emphasis on communication in language teaching at the expense of accuracy. The promise that the communicative classroom activities would help learners develop communicative competence, as well as linguistic competence, did not always happen. Programs where there was an extensive use of "authentic communication," particularly in the early stages of learning, reported that students often developed fluency at the expense of accuracy, resulting in learners with good communication skills but a poor command of grammar and a high level of fossilization (Higgs and Clifford, 1982).

One feature of fossilized language items that suggests a partial explanation for the phenomenon is that fossilized errors tend not to affect our understanding of the speaker, although they might be irritating and may also be stigmatized, since they often reflect errors that are typical of very basic-level learners (such as omission of third-person "s"). Since fossilized errors do not

generally trigger misunderstanding and hence do not prompt a clarification request from listeners, learners may simply never notice them or become aware that they are there. And as we saw earlier in discussing the noticing hypothesis, unless speakers notice such errors, it is unlikely that they will correct them.

Motivation is another factor. Some learners may feel that since English is not their first language anyway, it is perfectly acceptable to make mistakes, and it is not particularly important, anyway. They are more interested in making themselves understood and less concerned about the aesthetic impact of their English on the listener. If this is the case, there is little the teacher can do unless learners undergo a change of attitude, something that will depend upon the social role that English plays in their lives. Other learners, however, may be motivated to acquire error-free English, and the following questions then arise:

- How can learners become aware of (notice) the fossilized errors in their own speech?
- What kinds of instructional techniques are likely to be most effective in helping remove fossilized errors?

Suggestions for addressing the first question involve learners becoming active monitors of their own language production through listening to recordings of their own speech and through having others monitor their speech for fossilized errors in focused listening sessions. The second question leads into the area of error correction and the issues of what kinds of errors to correct and when and how to correct them. This brings us back to the noticing and the output hypotheses discussed earlier, which suggest that to address fossilization, classroom activities should involve the following:

- Incorporating a more explicit treatment of grammar within the curriculum.
- Building a *focus on form* into teaching through the use of activities centering on raising consciousness, or noticing grammatical features of input or output.
- Using activities that require stretched output (i.e., which expand or "restructure" learners' grammatical systems through increased communicative demands and attention to linguistic form).

Conclusion

From the discussion above, we can identify a number of areas that need to be addressed if learners are to move from the intermediate to an upper-intermediate/advanced level of language proficiency. They will now need to achieve the following:

- Expand their grammatical competence, including acquiring new ways of using known forms, as well as adding more complex language resources to their linguistic repertoire.
- Become more fluent and accurate language users.
- Develop the capacity to monitor their own language use as well as that of others, and to notice the gap between their productive competence and those of more advanced language users.
- Continue to develop their vocabulary, particularly at the 5,000 to 6,000 word range.
- Develop a greater awareness of and familiarity with patterns of lexical collocation.
- Master the use of conversational routines and other means of participating actively in conversation and other forms of spoken discourse.
- Further develop their proficiency in listening, reading, and writing.

Attaining these goals requires providing learners with a rich source of language learning experiences that allow for the gradual development of language skills across the different modalities of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These experiences should allow learners to become successful monitors and managers of their own learning, aware of the limitations of their current level of language ability, but also aware of the means by which they can move beyond the intermediate learning plateau to more advanced levels of language use.

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