

***All politics is local...
and so is language teaching***

Patsy M. Lightbown

Distinguished Professor Emerita
Concordia University, Montreal

Connecting Research and Practice Across Contexts



“In my own context almost nobody reads [research] publications— [teachers] **don't have time.**

There is a **huge gap between research and practice in the US.**” (Borg, 2006)

*What do you researchers know
about language teaching? **Bridging
the gap** between SLA research and
language pedagogy*

(Erlam, 2008)

In *SSLA & Language Learning* from 1990 to 2010, **“lab” studies outnumbered classroom studies by 3 to 1.**

(Plonsky, 2013)

Second Language Teaching
Journal of Immersion and Content-
Based Language Education
Modern Language Journal
Canadian Modern Language Review

“No matter how diligently researchers work to include **all the variables that teachers work with in a typical day**, the data they collect and the conclusions they draw are, by necessity, less complex than the reality that teachers confront every day.” (Clarke, 1994)

“Not all phenomena of interest have been examined in the real world complexity of classrooms, and even those that have are obviously constrained in generalisability by the **particular contexts** in which they were investigated.” (Collins & Marsden, 2016).

“...the problem with research is ... its assumption that knowledge can be transferred from the research context to **a particular classroom context.**”

(Gore & Gitlin, 2004)

Why try to bridge the gap?

Research is one source for understanding and insight into what works and what doesn't in a given classroom.

If all language teaching is *local*, what can we learn from “generalizations” drawn from research in a variety of second language acquisition contexts?

- **Convergent concerns across
divergent contexts**
 - Ballinger and Lyster (2011)

Great Expectations 1985, 2000

10 GENERALIZATIONS

In 2016

- Are the ten generalizations...
 - Compatible with classroom-based research?
 - Relevant to *local* classroom teaching?

Adults and adolescents can *acquire* a second language.

There are predictable sequences in acquisition...

Each learner creates a systematic *interlanguage*...

More input is not going to make a difference; learners need to be pushed when their focus is on academic content to use **target forms which are in competition with highly accessible interlanguage forms.**

(Ranta & Lyster, 2007)

Older learners do not achieve “native-like”
mastery of L2.

But neither do most “younger” learners.

For most L2 learners, the greatest
impediment to success is ...

For most L2 learners, the greatest impediment to success is **the amount of time devoted to the task.**

One cannot achieve ... command of a
second language in one hour a day.
At any age.

Practice does not make perfect.

True, if “practice” is defined as
decontextualized drill.

But practice leads to learning if we

- practice enough

- practice the right things

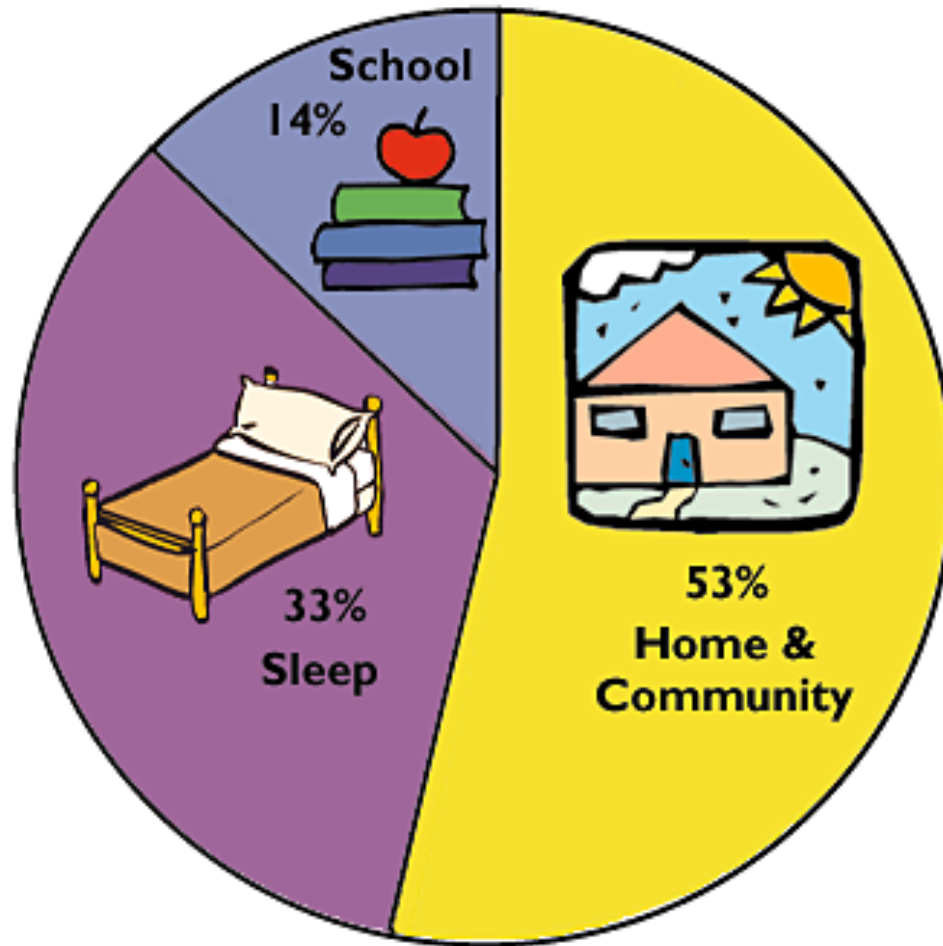
- practice in a variety of contexts

Practice enough...

Child L1 = 15,000 – 20,000 hours

Early immersion = 5,000 hours

Foreign language instruction <1000 hours



From Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p26

Practice in a variety of contexts

- Pedagogical reasons
 - Keep it interesting
 - Respond to different backgrounds, learning preferences, and abilities

Practice in a variety of contexts

- Cognitive psychology reasons
 - The specificity of practice (we get better at what we practice)
 - Transfer Appropriate Processing

Transfer Appropriate Processing

- It is easier to remember something that we know when “retrieval” conditions are similar to learning conditions.
 - More varied learning conditions lead to more varied retrieval conditions.

Knowing a language rule does not mean
one will be able to use it in communicative
interaction.

Knowing a language rule does not mean one will be able to use it in communicative interaction.

The opposite is also true!

Isolated explicit error correction is usually ineffective in changing language behavior.

...but sustained, targeted, clear *feedback on error* is an essential part of second language acquisition.

The learner's task is enormous because language is enormously complex.

Maybe I should have just said “enormous”

Learners' ability to understand language in a meaningful context exceeds their ability to comprehend decontextualized language and to produce language of comparable complexity and accuracy.

And we usually focus on meaning.

Form-Meaning Competition

The chemicals interacted
and changed color..



Finding the language-content balance

Paul Nation's Four Strands

Meaning-focused input

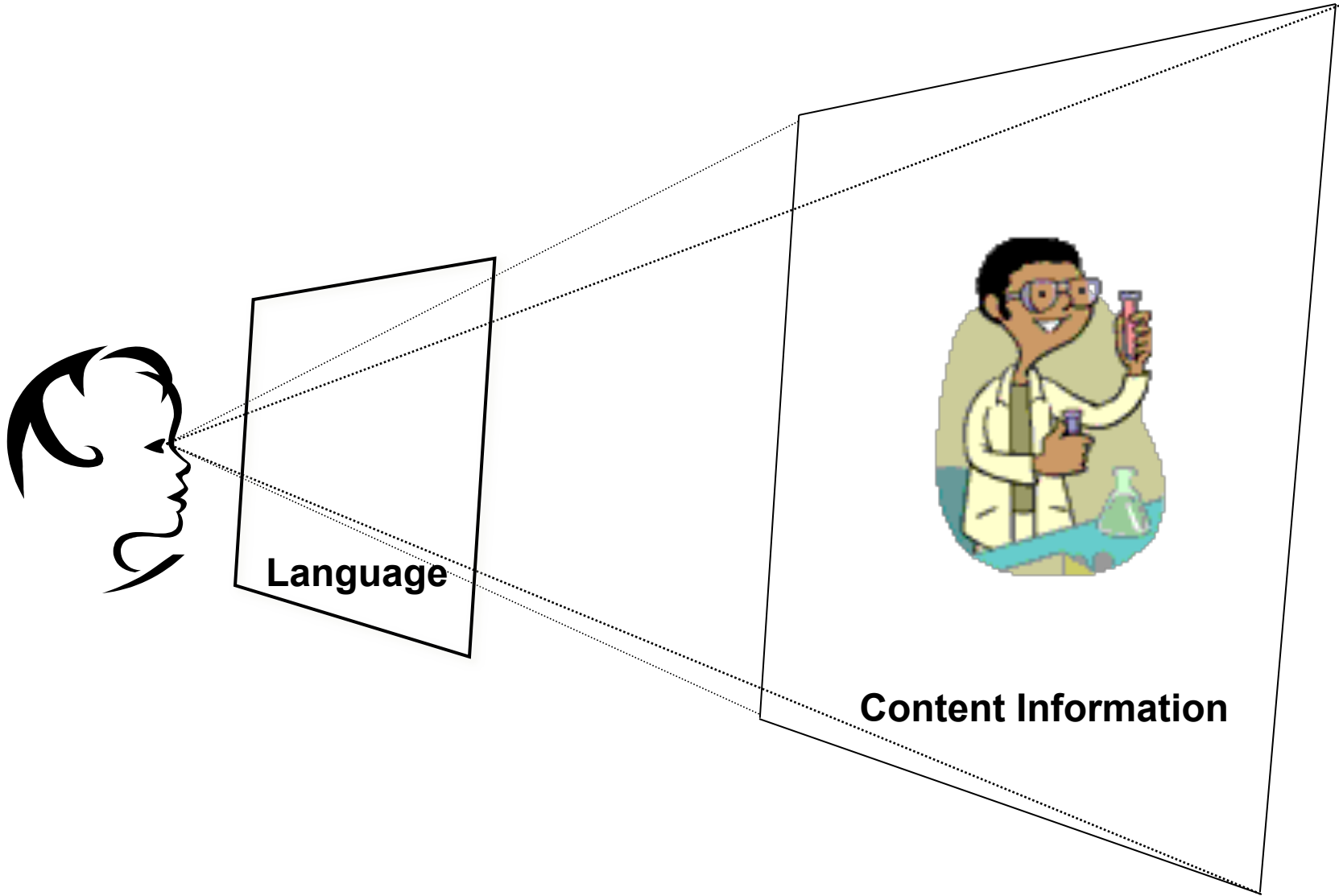


Meaning-focused output



Language-focused learning



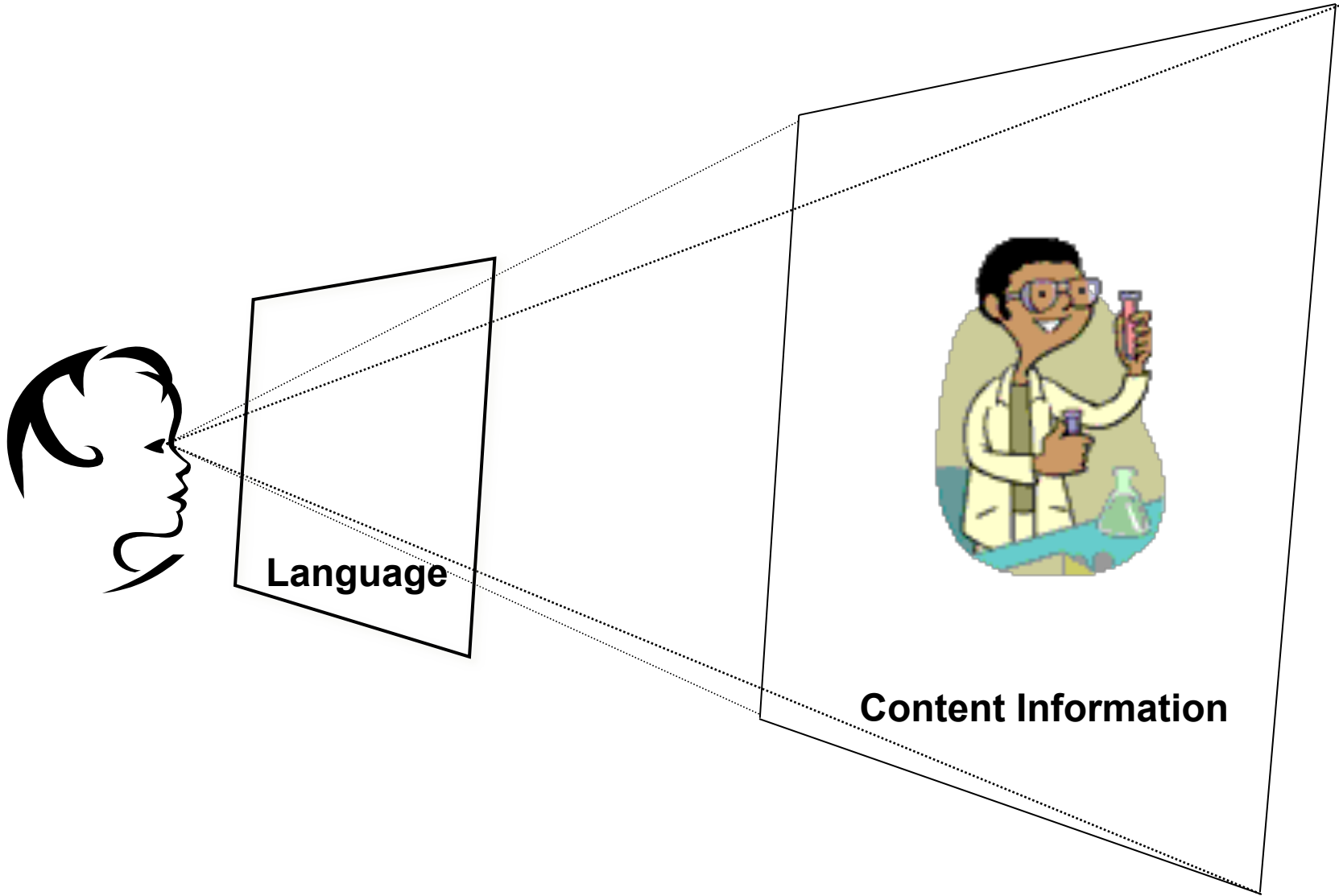




Chemical reaction
.....
Past tense
.....
"I thought..."
.....
Language



Content Information



Four Strands in Language Teaching

Meaning-focused input

Meaning-focused output



Language-focused learning

Fluency development

Fluency development



The generalizations from SLA research can guide our expectations, but the *local* conditions of a particular classroom affect the way they are experienced.

**Nothing ever becomes real till it is
experienced (Keats, 1819)**