



Principles of Language Learning

Principles taken from:

Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy, 2nd Ed.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Explanations by: Jan Dormer

Cognitive Principles

1. Automaticity

Many components of language must be learned to the point of automaticity. When we use a language, we cannot consciously think about all the words and grammar that we are using. Some parts of language must be readily available in our subconscious, to be used automatically.

2. Meaningful Learning

“Meaningful learning will lead to better long-term retention than rote learning” (p. 57). Language learners need to understand the language that they are hearing and using, and the topics discussed should be of interest to them.

3. Anticipation of Rewards

Learners are driven by the anticipation of rewards. These may be “tangible or intangible, long term or short term” (p. 58). Language learners need a reason to learn the language.

4. Intrinsic Motivation

Language learning is most successful when there is intrinsic (internal), rather than extrinsic (external) motivation. When language learning stems from the learner’s needs or desires, the learner is said to have intrinsic motivation. A learner who only has extrinsic motivation will often give up during the long haul of learning a language.

5. Strategic Investment

Language learning time should be invested wisely in activities that result in real language acquisition. Clear learning goals and an understanding of personal learning styles can help the learner to use language learning time strategically.

Affective Principles

6. Language Ego

Learning a new language involves developing new ways of “thinking, feeling, and acting—a second identity” (p. 61). This new and different self can cause learners to feel uncertain and defensive at times.

7. Self-Confidence

Successful language learners are self-confident language learners. They believe that they can achieve their language learning goals.

8. Risk-Taking

Successful language learners are willing to make mistakes. They are willing to take risks, and therefore they have more opportunities to learn through both successes and failures.

9. Language–Culture Connection

Learning a language also involves learning about cultural values and different ways of thinking. Successful language learners understand that using a new language may involve expressing ideas and feelings in very new and different ways.

Linguistic Principles

10. Native Language Effect

A learner’s native language can both facilitate and interfere with learning the new language. Words that are similar in both languages (*cognates*), will help in language learning, but features that are different may interfere with the language learning process.

11. Interlanguage

All language learners go through a developmental process during which time they use the language imperfectly. A learner’s interlanguage should be seen as progress, not as a failure or a refusal to learn.

12. Communicative Competence

If communicative competence is the final goal, language learning activities need to focus on the skills needed for effective communication in authentic contexts. These skills include both fluency and accuracy, as well as the ability to use language appropriately in real-world contexts.