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UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

To become engaged learners, students need to understand that learning a language is not the same as learning *about* a language. When students think of the language as a school subject like any other, they may learn a great deal about its vocabulary, grammar, and sentence and discourse structure, but the language will not become a true medium of communication for them and won't engage them very deeply. Students need to understand that learning a language means becoming able to use it to comprehend, communicate, and think – as they do in their first language.

Students also need to recognize that language learning takes place in stages. Interpretive skills (listening, reading) develop much more quickly than expressive skills (speaking, writing), and the ability that students covet most -- the ability to speak the second language fluently -- requires the longest period of growth.

All language learners have to work through a sequence of "approximate" versions called interlanguages (ILs), each of which represents a level of understanding of the target language. Understanding the features of ILs can help teachers and learners understand and monitor the language learning process.

Uniqueness: ILs vary significantly from learner to learner in the early stages of language learning. Learners impose rules of their own on the oral and written input they receive. Each learner does this differently, combining emerging understanding of the rules of the new language with ideas derived from the first language and other information that comes from their individual situations and backgrounds.

Systematicity: As learners begin to develop proficiency in a language, they make errors in systematic ways. For example, once students learn the inflections for a single class of verbs, they may apply them to all classes indiscriminately. These errors are based on systematic assumptions, or false rules, about the language. When students become aware of this aspect of their language skill development, they often appreciate and even ask for overt error correction from the instructor.

Fossilization: Some false rules become more firmly imprinted on the IL than others and are harder for learners to overcome. Fossilization results when these false rules become permanent features of a learner's use of the language.

Convergence: As learners' rules come to approximate more closely those of the language they are learning, convergence sets in. This means that learners who come from different native language backgrounds make similar assumptions and formulate similar hypotheses about the rules of the new language, and therefore make similar errors.