Essential Factors Affecting EFL Learning Outcomes*

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There are many factors that affect the success or failure of foreign language learning. Some of these factors have more to do with cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of language learning, while others are related to curricular issues, teacher factors or learner factors, and a whole host of situational factors. In this article, I have selected eight factors (i.e., roles of input, output, fluency, formulaic expressions, motivation, grammar, vocabulary, and amount and intensity of instruction) which to a large extent are within the control of classroom teachers, and which play essential roles in the success of a foreign language programme. I argue that when each of these factors are given due attention by teachers, school administrators, and other key stakeholders, there is more than a fair chance that we might be able to raise the proficiency level of our EFL students up to a level considered sufficient for a variety of functional communicative purposes.

**Key words:** L2/FL proficiency, input, output, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, motivation

1. INTRODUCTION

For many years I have been intrigued by a classic question of why some learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) achieve a high level of proficiency while many others are not as successful. After some six years of formal English instruction in high schools, many students continue to have difficulty expressing themselves in English both in speech and writing. They may have accumulated a rather large stock of vocabulary and learned numerous grammatical structures, but they don’t seem to be able to put this knowledge into practical use. Many of the teachers that I have met in the course of my work as a language

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teacher educator have largely confirmed my observation above.

What could be some of the key factors that can account for this lack of success in learning English? For the past 10 years or so I have been reflecting on this question and have had numerous discussions with ELT colleagues at academic conferences and with classroom teachers at seminars and workshops that I conducted. I have discussed factors that relate to cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of language learning and how they might impact instructed classroom learning in EFL contexts; I have also reflected on teacher factors (e.g., teacher’s content and pedagogical knowledge), curricular factors (e.g., types of curricula and how the curricular contents are organized and sequenced, ), learner factors (e.g., motivation, attitudes, and strategies) and situational factors (e.g., class size and availability of learning resources). There are indeed numerous factors that can impact language learning. But for the purpose of this paper, I have selected eight factors (i.e., roles of input, output, fluency, formulaic expressions, motivation, grammar, vocabulary, and amount and intensity of instruction) that in my opinion deserve serious consideration.

I am not suggesting that we should focus solely on these eight factors in our teaching. There are other factors that we need to take into account depending on the unique teaching contexts we find ourselves in. Nor am I suggesting that these factors would guarantee that every student would reach a high level of proficiency. What I am suggesting is that if these factors become the focus of our instruction, our chance of being successful in raising our students’ level of proficiency up to a working or functional level may become higher.

2. ROLE OF INPUT

Input is arguably one of the most important elements in language learning. It does not matter whether we are talking about children learning their mother tongue or adults learning a second or foreign language; they need a large amount of language input. Years of research by L2 researchers have clearly demonstrated the critical role of input in L2 learning. And yet, in EFL situations, students normally receive minimal amounts of input, which come largely from the teachers (if they happen to use English regularly) and the course materials. Input is generally quite scarce outside the classroom.

Among the most well-known L2 researchers is Stephen Krashen who claims that input is a necessary and sufficient condition for language learning (Krashen, 1982, 2004). Although other L2 researchers do not fully agree with Krashen’s rather dogmatic position, no one disagrees with him that input is a necessary condition for language learning. In other words, the general consensus seems to be that learners need to hear and see a lot of English in and outside the classroom, but that input alone is not the only factor that is responsible for the language proficiency development of the learners.
In the language classroom, language input essentially refers to oral or written language that a learner receives. However, not all input is useful for language learning. If our students are exposed to language that they cannot comprehend, they will not learn anything much from it. Research has shown that for input to be beneficial for language development, it has to be highly comprehensible, and abundantly and reliably available in the classroom as well as outside the classroom. In addition, it has to be meaningful and interesting so as to engage students’ attention (Renandya, 2007, 2011, 2012). There is now ample evidence to show that learners who receive a lot of interesting and meaningful comprehensible language input through extensive reading/listening tend to have a stronger mastery of the grammar of the language and a larger vocabulary size, and achieve a higher level of proficiency in English (Day & Bamford, 1998; Renandya, 2007, 2011).

Given the central role of input in language acquisition, in particular in the early phase of learning, it appears reasonable to suggest the following two points when we try to provide rich input in the classroom. First, we should strive to use more English in the classroom as in many EFL classrooms, teacher talk often serves as the main source of language input. We should use language that is pitched at the right level, and that is rich enough to expose students to a full range of features commonly observed in authentic communicative settings. Second, we should provide opportunities for students to read and listen to a lot of interesting and comprehensible language. This can be done through implementing an extensive reading/listening programme, where students are given a big amount of highly comprehensible and interesting materials to read/listen on a regular basis.

3. THE ROLE OF OUTPUT

Ellis (2005, p. 218) writes, “Contrary to Krashen’s belief that acquisition is dependent entirely on comprehensible input, most researchers now acknowledge that learner output also plays a part.” L2 researchers (e.g., Ellis, 2005; Swain, 1999) agree that learner output is useful for learners’ language development. It can make learners pay more attention to grammar, thus enabling them to produce more accurate language; it can provide them with an opportunity to try out newly learned grammatical points; it can facilitate faster access and retrieval to existing linguistic knowledge, which through repeated use improves learners’ fluency; and finally, it enables them to develop their ability to produce longer stretches of speech, thus enhancing their discourse skills.

Because of these benefits, EFL teachers are often too eager to introduce output-based activities in the classroom. However, a word of caution is in order. If we force learners to speak or write too early, they are likely to produce language that is grammatically unacceptable. If this continues for a period of time (which often happens in
communicatively oriented classrooms), their communicative skills may increase (e.g., they become more fluent), but their grammatical system remains stagnant and shows no sign of developments. Richards (2010, p. 8) aptly describes two key characteristics of learners whose fluency may have developed at the expense of complexity:

- Learners’ language may be both relatively fluent and accurate but shows little evidence of appropriate grammatical development.
- Complexity of the learners’ language does not match his or her proficiency level.

Where learner output is concerned, the following two points are important to note when we design speaking or writing tasks. First, we need to design tasks that link input- with output- based practice. This often means giving students opportunities to read and listen a number of texts to help them become familiar with the language that they will later need for production. Second, fluency-based speaking or writing activities should involve the students practicing familiar or known materials. This would ensure that their oral and written production is both fluent and accurate.

A note of caution regarding output-based activities is in order. Swain’s (1999) comprehensible output hypothesis is often used to justify the introduction of speaking and writing activities in the classroom. It is worth noting that Swain talks about the comprehensible output idea in the context of French immersion students in Canada. These students are (1) already exposed to massive amounts of comprehensible input and (2) already fluent in French. Hence, providing opportunities for her students to produce the language makes sense and in fact serves a good purpose. For these students, pushing them to produce more language, Swain (1985) argues, is a good way of noticing a gap in their language knowledge and of stretching their current level of competence.

Typical EFL students, however, are still at the lower end of the proficiency continuum, have not developed a sufficient linguistic base, and still struggle with basic language comprehension and production. Pushing them to speak and write too early would be pedagogically indefensible. Many teachers know too well that lower proficiency learners often find speaking one of the most (if not the most) anxiety-causing activities. Indeed, for some foreign language students, speaking in front of the whole class could be the greatest source of stress and anxiety (Price, 1991, cited in Krashen, 1998). This is not to say that they should be forbidden to produce language. They should indeed be allowed or even encouraged to produce language, but it is probably not a good idea to force them to express themselves using grammatical constructions or vocabulary words that they have not learned well.
4. GRAMMAR

The role of grammar in language teaching is less controversial than it used to be. People now agree that grammar is an essential part of language learning and teaching. You can’t learn a language without learning its grammar. As Richards and Renandya (2002) point out “...without a good knowledge of grammar, learners’ language development will be severely constrained” (p. 145). What continues to be an unresolved issue concerns the following questions: How much grammar do learners need? Which grammar items do learners need most? How do we teach grammar effectively? Should it be taught explicitly or implicitly?

On the question of how much and which grammar our students need most, I would agree with Swan (2002) that we tend to teach too much grammar and many of the grammar items we teach are often not immediately useful for our students. Instead of trying to teach the entire grammar of the English language, which many teachers are tempted to do, he suggests that we should select those grammar items based on two considerations: comprehensibility and acceptability.

Learners need basic grammatical structures to communicate common types of meaning successfully, i.e., to produce comprehensible language. Swan (2002) points out that we don’t know precisely what these structures are, but they are likely to include basic sentence structures (e.g., SVO structure and interrogative structures), basic verb forms, the main tenses (present, past, progressive, and perfective) and the use of modals (e.g., can, could, should, must). If our learners do not know how to use these basic structures, they will have a hard time making themselves understood. The following text produced by an undergraduate student majoring in English in a university in Indonesia illustrates this point:

*The teacher can reading book and searching in internet, how to teach English Language to the teacher? For example: The teacher can reading book about, how to the other people can understand English Language very fast or the teacher can searching in internet or the teacher can write in Facebook or email, how to teach English Language to other countries.*

Being able to produce comprehensible language is not enough. Swan contends that “...students need a higher level of grammatical correctness than is required for mere comprehensibility” (2002, p. 152). Their speech will have to be socially acceptable, because society often demands that we speak with a certain degree of grammatical sophistication. Employers, for example, often consider people who speak with unacceptable grammar to be socially undesirable individuals, labelling them with such negative adjectives as sloppy, careless, unreliable, and untrustworthy. One important thing
to remember here is that we don’t need to demand an unreasonably high level of grammar to produce socially acceptable language.

Thus the current thinking is that grammar is too important to be ignored, and it should continue to become an important part of our teaching, keeping in mind that our students need to learn just enough grammar so that their language becomes linguistically comprehensible and socially acceptable. Complex grammatical structures such as the subjunctives, complex conditional clauses, and the future perfect tense which are commonly taught in school and tested in the examination should perhaps not be included in the curriculum.

The twin criteria of comprehensibility and acceptability are also well-aligned with recent thinking in the field, in particular with respect to the emerging status of English as the world’s lingua franca. McKay (2003, 2012) and others (e.g., Llurda, 2009) for example have suggested that we need to reconceptualize the goals of English language teaching. The traditional goals of achieving native-like competence does not reflect the current reality that our students are more likely to use English with other users of English from expanding circle countries such as China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. They argue that language teaching goals that prepare students to speak and be understood by other users of English are more appropriate in today’s ELT. In other words, our students’ language should be internationally comprehensible and acceptable in the global community.

One last point about grammar relates to the familiar advice given by proponents of the communicative approach, i.e., we should not worry too much over grammatical accuracy as long as the students are able to communicate their ideas in the foreign language. Language errors, we are told, are not important as long as they do not interfere with the intended message of our communication (Littlewood, 1981). While this advice can be useful in some contexts, we should not take it to the extreme and ignore the importance of linguistic accuracy. Indeed, what often distinguishes between instructed and uninstructed learning situations is that the former can provide the kind of nourishing linguistic environments in which our foreign language learners can learn to speak the language with a reasonable degree of fluency, accuracy, and complexity. In contrast, untutored learners in the US like Wes, a Japanese immigrant (Schmidt, 1984), and Alex, a Turkish immigrant (Polat & Kim, 2013), were both very fluent users of English but their ability to produce accurate and complex language remained severely limited. Thus, one distinct advantage of an instructed learning situation is that it can provide learners with the opportunity to develop all three components of language proficiency, i.e., fluency, accuracy, and complexity.
5. VOCABULARY

Grammar is important; vocabulary is even more important. Wilkin (1972, p. 111) writes, "Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." Intuitively, we know all along that words are the most important building blocks of language; without words, language cannot exist. We also know that we need a lot of words in order to communicate our thoughts, feelings, and ideas with precision. Foreign language learners often recount how they have difficulty expressing themselves in a foreign language not because they don’t have ideas, but because they lack the vocabulary to express these ideas.

Empirical evidence supporting our observation is currently available. Research has shown that there is a strong and reliable correlation between vocabulary size and language skills such as reading, writing, listening. Alderson (2005) reports the following correlations between vocabulary size and a number of language skills:

- Vocabulary and Grammar: \( r = .64 \)
- Vocabulary and Listening: \( r = .61 - .65 \)
- Vocabulary and Reading: \( r = .64 \)
- Vocabulary and Writing: \( r = .70 - .79 \)

Given these strong relationships, Alderson (2005) concludes that "the size of one’s vocabulary is relevant to one’s performance on any language test, in other words, that language ability is to quite a large extent a function of vocabulary size" (p. 88).

But how many words do our students need? A general response to this would be "many, the more the better." But for pedagogical purposes, we can be a bit more precise, at least in terms of the number of words required for good comprehension. According to Cobb (2007),

...after decades of guesswork, there is now widespread agreement among researchers that text comprehension depends heavily on detailed knowledge of most of the words in a text... (p. 38)

...the minimum number of word families needed for non-specialist reading of materials designed for nonnative speakers to be between 3000 (Laufer, 1989) and 5000 word families (Hirsch & Nation, 1992)... (p. 41)

How about EFL high school students? Do they need 3,000-5,000 words? Ideally yes, but except for those highly motivated students, this would be a hard-to-achieve target. I would estimate that EFL students would need an active vocabulary of at least 2,000 high
frequency words to read familiar, non-technical texts on the internet, to write a variety of non-specialist texts for various different purposes. These 2,000 high frequency words are important for listening and speaking too, as they “serve as an essential base needed for daily interaction and speaking,...” (Hinkle, 2006, p. 122).

The key thing to remember is that our students need to develop an **in-depth knowledge** of what these words mean and how to use them appropriately in a variety of contexts. Many would agree with me that our students’ level of word knowledge is often rather superficial. They probably know the most basic meaning of the words, but not their variant or expanded meanings. For example, many students know the word *give* (to offer something to someone) and can perhaps use the word in following sentences:

- She gave me a nice present for my birthday.
- Give my regards to your brother and everyone in the family.

But we rarely, if ever, see them use the word *give* in the following sentences:

- I gave you my word that it won’t happen again in the future.
- He gave his last breath peacefully.
- They gave their all to their noble cause.
- The boy gave everyone in class the flu.
- Do give it a try even if your chance of getting it right is slim.

Vocabulary researchers (e.g., Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010) agree that there are different levels of vocabulary knowledge, and learners seem to go through these levels incrementally:

| Level 1 | I don’t know what the word means (I have not seen or heard the word before). |
| Level 2 | I have seen/heard the word but only have a vague idea of what it means. |
| Level 3 | I know what the word means and can use it in limited contexts. |
| Level 4 | I know what the word means really well and can use it in a variety of contexts. |

Repeated observations indicate that our students seem capable of reaching Level 3, but only a few are able to get to Level 4. Level 4, as described by Nation (2001), involves knowing (1) the form of the word (e.g., how it is pronounced and spelled, its morphological composition), (2) the meaning (e.g., its referential and pragmatic meanings),
(3) the use (e.g., its collocation and grammatical functions). It is this level of knowledge that would enable our foreign language learners to use the 2,000 high frequency words referred to above flexibly and creatively for diverse communicative situations and purposes.

This section is not complete without a brief commentary on a vocabulary teaching technique called guessing from contexts. This is a popular technique among EFL teachers, but its effectiveness is largely based on untested theories and assumptions. The meaning of an unfamiliar word found in a text, so the argument goes, can be successfully inferred if one knows how to make use of the contextual clues that surround the word. On the surface, this suggestion makes a lot of sense. But upon closer scrutiny, guessing word meanings from context is anything but straightforward. Relevant contextual clues are not always available in authentic texts; in fact some of the clues can be downright misleading; that is, if we make use of the clues, they might actually lead us an incorrect guess of the meaning of the word (Folse, 2004). In addition, recent research has demonstrated clearly that successful guessing is possible when learners know 98% or more of the words in the text (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010). We know only too well that the majority of our students know much fewer words, which makes guessing an extremely difficult, if not impossible, task. This guessing technique, according to Folse (2004), is based more on unfounded myths than on strong empirical evidence. Folse (2004) and others have suggested that we abandon this guessing from context method and instead explore other more productive and evidence-based vocabulary teaching techniques.

6. SET EXPRESSIONS

Set expressions are also known as fixed expressions, lexical chunks, or formulaic language. According to Wood (2002), "...formulaic language units refer to multiword or multiform strings produced and recalled as a chunk, like a single lexical item, rather than being generated from individual items and rules" (p. 3). Examples of formulaic language include the following familiar phrases and sentences:

- Oh my god
- Off the top of my head
- Come and go
- On the other hand
- I'm on my way.
- Do you really mean that?
- You've got to do what you've got to do.
- I'm afraid I'm going to give your presentation a miss.
• And many others.

Competent users of English have thousands of these expressions stored as single units in their heads. There is ample evidence showing that the use of formulaic language enables people to speak fluently. Wood (2002, p. 12) says that “Studies of speech fluency show that formulas are essential to maintain smoothness and speed of real-time speech, and they play an important role in written expression as well, especially as regards the development of textual cohesion.”

How is this formulaic language acquired? It appears that children acquire fixed phrases and expressions through massive amounts of exposure to the language since young. They acquire these as wholes, use them as whole units as well in appropriate situations during their interactions with other people. It is very much later that they break these chunks into smaller parts and discover the rules that govern the structures of sentences. Wood (2002, p. 12) notes, “First, they appear to be acquired as wholes, then they become segmented and analyzed into component parts, while retaining their original status as formulas.”

We don’t learn language by first learning the rules and then apply these rules when we use the language. Research into the development of formulaic expressions seem to indicate that language is first learned as chunks or unanalyzed wholes. In the early stage, children use these chunks to communicate ideas and express their needs and wants, and later start using the different parts of the chunks in creative combinations as they acquire the “grammar” of the language. Unfortunately, this is not what is happening in instructed language learning situations, where language is first broken up into smaller units which are then presented to the students as discrete units. Students get to see the parts, but rarely see the wholes. Thus one implication is that we would need to give our students opportunities to see and hear these fixed expressions repeatedly, as often as possible, at the early stage of learning. This, again, can be done by encouraging our students to read and listen extensively in the language. Multiple exposures to formulaic expressions found in fiction as well as non-fiction texts would gradually enable learners to internalize these fixed language chunks.

7. FLUENCY

Fluency is often defined as the ability to process language with ease and accuracy. In the area of reading, fluency can be defined as “the ability to read rapidly with ease and accuracy, and to read with appropriate expression and phrasing. It involves a long incremental process, and text comprehension is the expected outcome” (Grabe, 2009, p. 291). According to Grabe (2010), fluency in reading is often associated with the
development of essential sub-skills such as word recognition and syntactic processing skills. The development of these skills is incremental, gradual and requires a long period of time. Extensive practice through extensive exposure to reading materials is needed to develop automaticity in these skills.

Unlike in reading, the research into fluency in listening is not as extensive. However, the available research evidence seems to suggest that fluency is also a key component to listening comprehension (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Lower proficiency learners for example often report having difficulty in understanding spoken language, because they can’t cope with normal speech rate and have problems recognizing words in connected speech. Here is a common “fluency” problem that lower proficiency foreign language learners often encounter when listening to spoken text that contained words that they couldn’t immediately recognize, thus disrupting the smooth processing of the words:

> Sometimes I hear a word that sounds very familiar in a sentence, but I cannot realize its meaning. I am very annoyed by this…when I check against the transcript, I often wonder how come I cannot recognize such a simple word. (Wang, 2010, pp. 91-92)

Although L2 researchers have begun to acknowledge the important role that fluency plays in language acquisition, it has not received due attention in L2 curriculum. Nation (2009, p. 2) laments that “Fluency development is often neglected in courses, partly because teachers and learners feel that they should always be learning something new. Fluency development, [in contrast], involves making the best use of what is already known” (cited in Grabe, 2010, p. 71). Fortunately, ELT researchers have begun to heed the call for more research into fluency development among EFL students. One promising line of research looks at how reading and listening fluency can be simultaneously developed through a familiar classroom activity known as reading-while-listening activity (Chang, 2011). Chang’s research shows that this activity improved her students’ listening “fluency” in that they were more able to listen to spoken texts dictated to them with greater ease and accuracy.

Another practical activity in which learners can develop fluency is to encourage them to do a lot of extensive reading and listening. In extensive reading and listening, learners read/listen to a lot of interesting materials pitched at their independent level. By doing this, they will repeatedly encounter language items that they have already known in a variety of contexts, and gradually develop faster and automatic language processing skills.
8. MOTIVATION

Terrell H Bell, former Secretary of Education during President Ronald Reagan's administration, once said, "There are three things to remember about education. The first one is motivation. The second one is motivation. The third one is motivation" (quoted in McInerney & Liem, 2008, p. 11).

That motivation plays a key role in learning is something that every teacher would readily acknowledge. Motivated learners are more enthusiastic, goal-oriented, committed, persistent and confident in their learning. They are willing to work hard to achieve their goal and do not easily give up until they achieve that goal. The key research findings on the role of motivation in second language learning have largely echoed those in general education. A prominent L2 motivation researcher, Zoltán Dörnyei, for example, in his seminal book Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom writes that “...during the lengthy and often tedious process of mastering a foreign/second language (L2), the learner’s enthusiasm, commitment, and persistence are key determinants of success or failure” (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 5). Dörnyei further points out that given the vital role of motivation in the L2 learning, “teacher skills in motivating learners should be seen as central to teaching effectiveness” (2001, p. 116).

What can teachers do to foster motivation in the foreign language classroom? There are 5 areas that teachers can work on to increase student motivation. I shall call these the 5 Ts of motivation: Teacher, Teaching methodology, Text, Tasks, and Test. Each of these is described briefly in the table below.

There are three points to note about motivation. First, it’s widely accepted that the responsibility to motivate students and to keep them motivated during the tenure of their studies rests with the teacher. Second, research has shown us that where motivation to learn within the school contexts is concerned, how we behave and do in the classroom has been shown to have a powerful impact on motivation. Finally, research by Dörnyei (2001) has demonstrated that “the best motivational intervention is simply to improve the quality of our teaching” (p. 26). In other words, good teaching can often lead to high student motivation, which in turns drives students to become more enthusiastic, more engaged, and more committed to their learning. The 5 Ts of motivation that I outlined above are reflective of these three points.
TABLE 1
The 5 Ts of Motivation

| T1 Teacher | A teacher who is caring, supportive, humorous, helpful and committed, who has a genuine interest in their students' learning and general well-being and who has good rapport with them, is more likely to be able to create a motivating classroom atmosphere and provide on-going support to student learning. |
| T2 Teaching methodology | A teacher who uses a variety of teaching methods, customized to the individual needs of the students, will be more successful in engaging them towards achieving the L2 learning target. |
| T3 Text | Both oral and written texts used as classroom materials should be interesting and relevant to the students. They should also be pitched at or slightly above their current level of proficiency. In other words, materials should be interesting and comprehensible, and also engaging cognitively and affectively. |
| T4 Task | Tasks that fall within students' comfort and stretch zones tend to be more motivating than those that are too demanding. Also, tasks that allow students to experience more success rather than failure are a great boost to student motivation. |
| T5 Test | Tests that serve as a learning tool, one that helps students to see their progress in a non-threatening manner, can drive students to work harder to achieve their learning goals. Focus more on assessment for learning than assessment of learning. The former is more informative and learning-friendly than the latter. |

9. AMOUNT AND INTENSITY OF INSTRUCTION

One of the reasons our students are not successful in learning English in school is probably due to the way the English curriculum is designed. In terms of amount of instruction, our students seem to get enough hours of English lessons. In high school, English is taught about 3-4 hours per week for 6 years, for a total of approximately 1,200 hours. In theory this amount should enable the students to have a working knowledge of the language. The reality, however, is that many, if not most, of our high school students are unable to converse in simple English, and their reading level is often close to non-functional, despite the fact that reading, a key objective in the curriculum, is given a substantial curriculum time.
While amount of instruction is important, intensity of instruction is no less important in language learning. Research has shown that instruction that is distributed over a longer stretch of time is less effective than one that is taught more intensively. Lightbown’s (2000) research in Canada with the French immersion programmes is exemplary and shows that “students who have intensive exposure to the second language near the end of elementary school have an advantage over those whose instruction was thinly spread out over a longer period of time.” (p. 499). Thus, it seems that the impact of teaching becomes diluted when instruction is offered over a long period of time, which is exactly what we see happening in high school where English is taught over six years, instead of intensively over say one or two years.

An analogy may help drive the message home more strongly. Let us say that it normally takes approximately 90 hours of driving lessons to learn how to drive a car. Let’s further assume that most people can do this successfully in three months. This comes to approximately 60 minutes of driving practice per day. But instead of three months, they have to take the driving lessons over a period of three years, for a five-minute lesson per day. Would they be able to drive a car at the end of the three years? They might be able to get the car out of the garage and reverse it back in, but they would probably not have enough confidence to drive the car on the street!

Another dimension of intensity refers to the utilization of classroom time. Teachers often report how classroom time is often not optimally utilized because they have to deal with a multitude of classroom routines (e.g., taking attendance and rearranging furniture) or with classroom management issues (e.g., dealing with student off task behavior and other disciplinary problems). These can take up a substantial amount of time, often reducing the intensity of instruction in a given lesson. Although 100% utilization may not be possible, we could try to reduce the amount of downtime and aim for an optimal use of classroom time by engaging students in meaningful learning activities. Data from classroom observations with primary school teachers show that highly effective first grade teachers differ from their less effective counterparts in that they are able to put into practice the 90/90 rule, i.e., they strive to ensure that 90% of the students are on-task and engaged in meaningful activities 90% of the time (Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996).

It appears then that increasing instructional and curricular intensity could have more positive effects of our students’ learning outcome than increasing the amount of instruction. Unfortunately, the latter (increasing amount of instruction) is a more popular solution with policy makers and ministry officials. Today English is offered at increasingly earlier years than ever, with some schools in some EFL countries making English a compulsory school subject starting in Grade 1. This well-meaning, but empirically unsupported, initiative however may not result in meaningful improvements in our foreign language learners’ proficiency.
10. CONCLUSION

There are certainly many other factors that can influence the outcomes of foreign language learning. Indeed, if we look at the professional literature, L2 researchers have investigated L2 acquisition from various theoretical perspectives (e.g., cognitive and socio-cultural) and methodological traditions (e.g., language-oriented methodology and communicative approaches), within various language learning contexts (e.g., instructed vs naturalistic, ESL vs EFL), and with learners of various age groups and proficiency levels. They have as a result come up with a long list of factors that contribute to language learning.

Unfortunately, for those new in the field of English language teaching, it is not always easy to sieve through the many proposals, suggestions, and recommendations that have been put forward by ELT experts. It is really a jungle out there, and it is very easy for the less experienced practitioners to be lost in the complex web of inter-related factors that L2 researchers believe to be important in language learning.

The eight factors I discuss in this paper are firmly based on my reading of the current literature in ELT and my own experience teaching language skills and also working with pre- and in-service teachers from various places in the region. I have carefully selected these eight factors because they form the foundation of language learning, the kind of factors that would enable our EFL students to develop a working proficiency in the language, being able to express most of their communicative needs in the English language. In IELTS terms, when these factors are fully operationalized in the curriculum, there is a good chance that our students would be able to reach somewhere between Band 5 or 6, with some of them perhaps achieving a higher proficiency level.

**Band 5: Modest user**

Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.

**Band 6: Competent user**

Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.

Source:

http://www.ielts.org/institutions/test_format_and_results/ielts_band_scores.aspx
The eight factors are neatly summarized in the mnemonic: FLAMINGOS in Table 2 below. The questions that come with each factor can be used to reflect on the extent to which we have given the attention that it deserves.

**TABLE 2**

**FLAMINGOS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>F</th>
<th>Fluency</th>
<th>Do we provide sufficient and balanced fluency activities in both the receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing) skills?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Lexis</td>
<td>Have we done our utmost in helping our students develop a deeper knowledge of the 2,000 or so high frequency words to the extent they can use them with ease, accuracy, and flexibility in varied communicative contexts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Amount and intensity</td>
<td>Keeping the amount of instruction constant, can we possibly add the intensity dimension to our teaching? Is it possible to teach more hours within a shorter period of time? Can we make sure that there is as little downtime as possible in our lesson and that the majority of the students are engaged in meaningful activities most of the time (the 90/90 rule)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Have we done our utmost to make sure that we have good rapport with the students and that our teaching methodology, the text, task, and test that we use are geared toward motivating our students to learn?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Input</td>
<td>Do our students receive sufficient amounts of oral and written language input that is highly interesting and comprehensible? Are suitable reading and listening/viewing materials available and easily accessible?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>Do we teach too much grammar? Can we reduce the amount of grammar teaching and focus instead on the kind of grammar that focuses more on comprehensibility and acceptability and also one that is more immediately useful for our students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Output</td>
<td>Do we provide sufficient opportunities for students to try out and use previously learned language in meaningful situations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Set expressions</td>
<td>Do we provide sufficient learning opportunities for our students to accumulate a large number of set expressions?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCES


Swan, M. (2002). Seven bad reasons for teaching grammar—and two good ones. In J. C.


Applicable levels: All

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