Part I: Similarities and Differences Between First & Second Language Acquisition

Children acquire their first language by building a language system starting with sounds, words, and then phrases and then adding to that base by acquiring more language through listening to others and trying out the language themselves. Thus, the child is not imitating or repeating adult words or phrases. When the child produces understandable language, those interacting with him encourage him. When he is not understood, others often try to guess the meaning and provide language for him (e.g., the child’s “see a goo-goo go by” is paraphrased by the mother as “yes, see the choo-choo go by”).

Grammatical errors (such as saying “goed” for went or “ho” for hose) indicate that children are developing a rule-based system. They have figured out that –ed means past tense and –z means plural, but they just haven’t learned the exceptions, yet. They have probably never heard “goed”, so they are not imitating or memorizing; they are unconsciously acting like little scientists: they listen to language, notice patterns and try them out. The patterns that are not reinforced eventually drop away.

A child may have the basics of language by age five or six, but is still developing vocabulary and complex sentence structures such as clauses and verb tenses. Even as an adolescent, children are still developing their first language.

The processes of first and second language acquisition are more similar than they are different with some distinct differences. Second Languages are often learned in a different setting, e.g., at school, and for a different purpose, e.g., for school purposes. That has advantages and disadvantages: one disadvantage is the time pressure to learn both language and content, and one advantage is that older learners have prior knowledge that they can build on and transfer to their new language, e.g., how to read in their first language, study skills, and academic content. Children learning their first language must learn developmental concepts while they are learning language. In terms of acquisition and learning, children acquire language largely through an unconscious process, whereas older learners partly “acquire” a new language and partly consciously “learn” a new language. Research seems to indicate that older learners make faster progress in learning a second language, but younger learners acquire higher levels of proficiency in a second language over the long run, especially with respect to pronunciation. There appears to be a “critical period” for acquiring language, thus, after this period, most individuals learning a second language tend to “fossilize” particularly in the phonology or sound system of the second language. This is why older, proficient speakers of English often speak with what is commonly referred to as an “accent.” (source: Teach Session III, Section 1, Learner Variables 1: Age, Motivation, Attitude, Aptitude, page 27)

Caregiver Speech:

The language that individuals who interact with young children use is referred to as “caregiver speech or motherese.” The principles of caregiver speech listed below are good
principles to use when interacting with second language learners as well, and they tend to come naturally to us if we do not censor or resist them. These principles include:

- Slower and simpler (not louder) speech. Speech is natural with plenty of time given for the child to respond.
- Focus on the here and now. The topic of the conversation is riddled with clues to meaning.
- Focus on meaning over form. When the child makes a mistake but the message is understood, the caregiver models the correct way to say it without overt correction or attention to the error.
- Extension and elaboration: The caregiver takes one or two words of the child’s and extends and elaborates on it: “Who wears a crown? Yes, a king wears a crown.”

Assisting with Comprehension and Oral Language Development:

Listed below are ways in which teachers can adjust they way they speak to ESOL students in order to be more comprehensible and suggestions for encouraging ESOL students to converse. These techniques are referred to as scaffolding techniques. Scaffolding is a term used by linguists to describe the support and assistance given to second language learners to assist with second language development. All of these suggestions assist ESOL students to operate within what the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky calls their “zone of proximal development.” Vygotsky believes that students need to be challenged with support and assistance so that they can exercise their next level of development, and therefore, progress in both learning and development. What the learner can do with assistance today, he/she can do independently tomorrow. Therefore, teaching should aim at tomorrow’s development and focus on the student’s “zone of proximal development.” (as cited in Peregoy & Boyle, 2001)

When speaking to ESOL students, teachers can facilitate comprehension in various ways. Below are some suggested ways in which teachers can adjust their language to be more comprehensible to ESOL students:

- pause frequently
- clearly indicate the most important ideas & vocabulary through intonation or writing
- avoid “asides”
- clarify pronouns
- use shorter sentences (subject-verb-object word order)
- increase wait time
- focus on student’s meaning, not grammar
- avoid interpreting on a regular basis (This does not mean that there is not a time and a place for using the first language; it means that if a pattern of concurrent interpreting is established, it teaches the student not to try to understand English but to wait until the concept is repeated in his stronger language thus preventing him from acquiring English.)
As ESOL students acquire English, teachers can facilitate this process in many ways. The techniques listed below are ones that scaffold or support ESOL students to converse.

- Ask questions in simplified language while establishing a pattern in the questions.
- Ask for elaboration, “tell me more about….”
- Be a good listener (eye-contact, non-verbal support, plenty of time).
- Provide encouragement to continue, “uh-huh. Really? What happened then?”
- Provide difficult words.
- Ask for clarification, “I’m not sure I understand. Can you say it again?”
- Paraphrase what the student said.

Note: These suggestions could be taught to peer tutors who might help ESOL students with their school work.