that Melvina has had. Through her experiences, Melvina has a foundation in preliteracy—
she is familiar with word order and patterns, rhyming, vocabulary, and concept develop-
ment—as well as background knowledge upon which to build. She will not have to
relearn acquired concepts when she begins to speak English; the concepts will transfer to
the new language.

Quality of Instruction

What happens in the classroom is vitally important. The teacher's daily routines, level of
lesson preparation, expectations of the students, use of essential teaching behaviors,
instructional strategies, knowledge of the subject matter, understanding of sociocultural
factors that affect the child, and techniques for modifying instruction for English learners
all impact learner outcomes, including language acquisition. The challenge for teachers
of students with diverse abilities is to create classroom conditions in which learners can
and will learn by adjusting texts, tasks, and instructional settings to match their needs
(Lipson & Wixson, 2002). It has been suggested that many learning problems experienced by students learning English are pedagogically induced, or the result of instruction
practices that are not suited to the learner, often resulting in inappropriate placement
in special education (Cummins, 1984). The interventions discussed in Chapter 1
are one way of eliminating inappropriate placement. These interventions are used along
with instructional practices that reflect effective teaching for second-language learners. If
instruction is not made comprehensible and accessible for students, the opportunity to
learn both English and content material decreases.

Effective language learning takes place in well-organized classrooms where there
are clear learning objectives, systematic instruction based on research-validated prac-
tices, and opportunities for interaction with the teacher and peers. Interactive instruction
allows students to use elaborated language around relevant topics, building English skills
while at the same time developing content knowledge.

Cognitive Ability

Many of the cognitive processes that are important for second-language acquisition are
related to general cognitive abilities, such as verbal memory, auditory perception, and
categorization. These abilities affect the language-learning process (Fillmore, 1985),
although wide variation among learners is expected in this area. Individuals with lower
cognitive ability are capable of acquiring a second language, but proficiency levels will
be equal to or lower than those in the first language. Further, studies found that students
in bilingual programs who had learning disabilities and low academic ability performed
as well as equivalent students in English-only programs (Lindholm-Leary & Genesee,
in press).

Teaching English Learners: Theory to Practice

Because one of the goals of sheltered instruction is to teach content—including new
concepts, information, and skills—to English learners, it is worthwhile to examine the
learning theories underpinning methods and practices. Although many teachers consider
theory irrelevant to practice, it is important to keep in mind the theoretical perspective
driving a given instructional method or approach. Most teachers have a “folk theory” or
implicit theory, that influences their teaching but may be unaware of the established theory underlying it. Teachers benefit from having a decision-making model rooted in theory to assist them in making instructional modifications that meet the learning needs of their students.

Individuals differ in their preferences and learning styles, and one single approach rarely meets the needs of all students. If students are not responding to instruction, teachers need to ask these questions:

1. What are the assumptions underlying the approach I’m using?
2. Do these assumptions apply to my students?
3. Do I obtain my desired outcome using this approach?

The process of reflecting on the instructional approach being used, examining the theoretical base for the approach, and appraising student learning needs may yield valuable information for maximizing student learning and performance.

The best teachers we have observed are able to use various approaches, depending on the context and the goals of the lesson, enhancing learning opportunities for students. Examining the components of various modes of instruction helps teachers develop a concept of and put into operation new or alternate teaching approaches. Teachers should draw from a continuum of teaching models (Saunders & Goldenberg, 1996).

In looking at the following overview of learning theories, it is important to keep in mind that classroom practices rarely are pure examples of single theories. Rather, effective teachers typically use a balanced approach that includes choices rooted in different learning theories. Many instructional methods and practices make use of aspects of several theoretical approaches. Similarly, sheltered instruction is not driven by a single theory but rather reflects several theoretical perspectives. Instruction for ELs requires attention to their second-language needs; therefore each theory presented will be examined with consideration for second-language issues.

**Humanistic Learning Theory**

The humanistic teacher is one who desires students to learn to interact well with others and to feel as good as possible about themselves. The affective well-being of students is a central focus of this approach (see Chapter 4) and is always a consideration when planning the schoolday. Personality development, including cooperation and consideration, is a primary value and is the focus of education.

Ms. Leung believes that student learning is enhanced when students feel good about themselves and the class operates as a community of learners. She frequently uses cooperative learning because it provides opportunities for students to contribute equally and to cooperate with one another (Slavin, 1995). She also schedules a daily sharing time for students to discuss personal interests, share a favorite book, show pictures of family and friends, or tell about a favorite school project or successful school effort. Through this process, Ms. Leung learns a great deal about each student, which enhances her ability to teach in a way that focuses on the strengths of each individual learner.

Ms. Leung’s classroom reflects humanistic learning theory. Humanistic learning theory is a general term for those theories that contend that the central focus of human learning is to develop high self-esteem and a healthy personality. Sternberg and Williams (2002) describe it as “a meaningful educational environment in which students are encouraged
to see themselves as capable; development of self-esteem; teachers acting warm and supportive; students doing their homework in a certain way—no rules for the sake of rules.” (See Woolfolk [2004] for more information on the affective domain, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Ericson’s stages of psychosocial development, Kohlberg’s stages of moral reasoning, and Marsh and Shavelson’s structure of self-concept.)

While a humanistic approach makes students feel comfortable, helping to lower their affective filters (see Theories of Second-Language Acquisition in this chapter), exclusive reliance on an affective approach may rob students of some of the direct, explicit instruction they need to meet standards. Further, there may be a tendency to lower expectations for ELs, giving the same credit for “trying” as for correct answers.

Developmental Learning Theory

Woolfolk (2004) defines development as naturally occurring stages that occur in an orderly fashion. These stages usually appear gradually and develop at different rates in different people. (See Woolfolk [2004] for more information on Piaget’s theory for the development of thinking and Vygotsky’s theories for development of language, general linguistic development, and reading development. Also see Sternberg and Williams [2002] for implications for teaching.)

Mr. Fleming believes in allowing each student to progress at his or her own pace. He structures class activities so that students can participate at their own levels. He evaluates students’ journals according to their ability level. Some students write a few words with an illustration, while others compose whole stories. Mr. Fleming often uses a language experience approach, in which students tell their own stories and he functions as a scribe. Students are taught using Writer’s Workshop (see Chapter 5), where they compose at their own levels of functioning.

Teachers whose practices are influenced by developmental learning theory subscribe to stagelike views of development and do not push students into development or force them to skip a stage. These teachers believe that inborn factors largely account for the unfolding of a child’s ability over time and allow this unfolding to take place at its own pace when the child is ready.

Strict adherence to a developmental approach may overlook students’ ability to move to a higher level of achievement because their performance may be influenced more by language than by developmental stage. With students learning English, it may be difficult to know with certainty when some students are ready for the next stage, especially when there are gaps in their academic backgrounds and they may have uneven development.

Social Interactionist Learning Theory

Influenced by the work of Vygotsky (1978), the sociocultural view of learning recognizes the unique role adults and older children play in learning, emphasizing the importance of modeling and the use of language to facilitate learning. These “more capable others” provide the child with the information and support necessary for intellectual growth by listening to the child and providing just the right help to advance his or her understanding. Assisted learning in the classroom involves giving prompts, reminders, and encouragement at the right time and in the right amounts to foster understanding.
According to this view, the social side of learning is important because interaction with teachers and peers has both cognitive and affective consequences. Through social interaction, students confront other people's points of view and discover how other people respond in various situations. This process of understanding others' points of view and learning to explain and defend one's own view not only gives students new information, but the social interaction adds a verbal level to their understanding. Social interaction, according to Vygotsky, contributes to the development of language.

Vygotsky viewed language as a child's first tool for social interaction. As children mature, they internalize speech and use it in their own private interactions with the environment. Children can often be seen talking aloud during play and directing their own actions, which eventually leads to language directing thought. One example of an instructional approach that facilitates this type of learning is the instructional conversations approach (see Chapter 7).

In Ms. Nelson's class, a lot of student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction can be heard and observed. As a teacher, Ms. Nelson sees her role as providing the right amount of information and support to students necessary for intellectual growth. During a lesson, Ms. Nelson listens to the children and provides the right help to advance the children's understanding. She does this by giving prompts, reminders, and encouragement at the right time and in the right amount to foster understanding. Rather than dominating the lesson and seeking specific correct answers, she is careful to ask questions that will draw out the children's ideas and assist them in constructing meaning from the text based on their own experiences and backgrounds. You will hear questions and comments like "Why do you think he will do that?", "Tell me more about that," and "Would you react that way under the same circumstances? Why?"

Sometimes ELs may need more explicit instruction and the type of repetition that is not typically a part of a social interactionist approach. For example, some information or vocabulary may be more effectively presented in lists, graphic organizers, or repetitive exercises (e.g., drill and practice) than through discussion.

Cognitive Learning Theory

Although there is no one cognitive learning theory, cognitivists tend to focus on such factors as kinds of knowledge; the information-processing model of learning, including perception, attention, memory, and metacognition; discovery learning; learning strategies; and problem solving (Woolfolk, 2004). They also tend to explore internal mental processes such as memory, reasoning, and strategies for acquiring facts and concepts. Most cognitive theorists do not try to explain all learning through a single theory but instead share a generally agreed upon philosophical orientation. Generally, cognitive psychologists believe that people are active learners who initiate experiences, seek out information to solve problems, and reorganize what they already know to achieve new insights.

Perhaps the major contribution of cognitivists has been in the area of memory as it relates to learning theory. For example, confirmation of mnemonic strategies (procedures that facilitate memory) has been gained through research into such subjects as verbal rehearsal, chaining, and the keywords strategy (see Chapter 5). Instructional choices focused on cognitive theory are those that encourage students to think about their own learning and those that focus students on their own learning. For example, when the teacher says, "Let's repeat this a few times so we can remember it," he or she is using
Verbal rehearsal is an instructional approach that Mr. Gimmlin uses often in his class. This is an intuitive approach in which students are provided with pieces of the knowledge "puzzle" and encouraged to induce the principle or rule. For example, in one lesson, Mr. Gimmlin gave students 20 Popsicle sticks and told them to make groups of 2. He asked how they would find out how many sticks they had. Some students said they would count them ("1, 2, 3... "). But one or two of the students said they would count by twos to make it easier. These students had essentially discovered multiplication. The teacher pointed out to the students that some of them had found an easier way to find out "how many": Counting by twos or threes is multiplying, which is an easier way to add. Mr. Gimmlin also uses mnemonic strategies to help students learn and retain information.

This approach may prove difficult for ELs if they lack the vocabulary needed to participate as fully as the approach intends. Many ELs, because of lack of English proficiency and gaps in their education, do not benefit from routines and structures that clue them into the teacher's expectations. In order to seek out information and initiate experiences, ELs would most likely need some structure or a minimum level of English proficiency.

Behavioral Learning Theory

While cognitivists are concerned with knowledge and how it is gained, saved, used, and lost, behaviorists believe learning is manifested through behavioral changes that can be observed and measured. (See Woolfolk [2004] for elaboration.) For behaviorists, language is a skill like any other behavior that we learn. Language is learned by presenting language with attractive experiences in the environment and by rewarding the learner once language occurs.

The best-known approach to behavioral learning is operant conditioning. The goal of the operant learning approach is to change behavior by manipulating antecedents and consequences. Modern behaviorists tend to focus on antecedents of behavior more than on its consequences, realizing that setting up the environment for success can do more to change behavior than waiting to enforce consequences. According to behaviorists, teachers can modify antecedents and assist learning by (1) demonstrating skills and asking students to imitate them, (2) walking students through an organized series of steps in a process, (3) clarifying concepts by providing examples and nonexamples, (4) providing clear, simple wording that is easy to imitate and that can be reinforced easily when reproduced, (5) and involving students actively throughout the learning process to provide ample practice.

Ms. Bobkowski begins most lessons by writing objectives on the board that indicate the step-by-step process students follow to be successful. Usually, the behaviors, or steps of the tasks, are sequenced from simple to more difficult, and instructional activities are carefully planned to increase learning. She also focuses on consequences in the form of positive reinforcers for increases in appropriate behavior, such as positive teacher affect, verbal praise, privileges such as computer time or free time, and any other reinforcers that are effective with the students. Students are dealt with individually, with
target behaviors reflecting the needs of the student. New behaviors are taught through continuous reinforcement. Ms. Bobkowski reduces inappropriate behavior by ignoring it and attending to appropriate behavior.

Behaviors are discussed in observable terms ("What are you going to do first? Where will you put it?" etc.), and learning is measured by the acquisition of new behaviors. For example, Ms. Smith asked students to write reports about their trip to Sea World. She specified that each student was to write a paragraph with a main idea and three detail sentences about the field trip. She also specified that students should indent, punctuate, and use capital letters correctly. She required a handwritten first draft; a self-corrected second draft, to be signed by a peer editor and the teacher; and a final version printed from the computer. After each phase, students were to take notes home to parents explaining their accomplishments. The teacher walked around class during each phase, giving support for participation and hard work. She assessed the results of each student's efforts and set goals for each accordingly. Over time, students were required to become more and more independent, with a focus on generalizing or using the newly learned skills in many different situations with increasingly reduced teacher supervision.

The behaviorist approach tends to be teacher directed and controlled. Many ELs develop language proficiency and understanding of concepts through interaction and discussion. It is difficult for students to learn a new language when they lack significant opportunities to practice using the language in authentic ways. Further, inquiry or discovery learning opportunities are lost when lessons are teacher dominated.

An understanding of learning theory can become a decision-making model when a teacher realizes that certain educational goals are more likely to be accomplished using specific approaches. If a teacher finds that some students are struggling in a given learning environment, it may be wise to think about which approaches are currently in use, which are missing, and what changes might be implemented to yield a balanced approach to support student learning and positive behavior supports.

**Summary**

A variety of language backgrounds and language proficiency levels are represented in U.S. classrooms today. Teachers can use their knowledge of theories that underlie practice to adjust instruction in order to better meet the individual needs of students. An understanding of second-language acquisition assists teachers in designing lessons that facilitate learning for English learners. For example, strong literacy skills in the native language facilitate English language acquisition, as we saw with the students profiled in Chapter 1. When teaching in English, the cognitive and linguistic demands of academic tasks should be considered and instruction modified to meet the needs of the students.

**Activities**

1. Discuss which "folk theories," or implicit theories, underlie your ideas about teaching.
2. Select three instructional approaches with which you are familiar (for instance, cooperative learning, the language experience approach, direct instruction, or thematic teaching). Identify the theories that influence each approach.