This five-day institute introduced the major theories of second language acquisition, taught the participants how to analyze learner language in terms of its accuracy, fluency, and complexity, and gave practical ideas about how to maintain a theoretical framework in the background while designing classroom practices that maximize language acquisition.

What we need to take into account when considering acquisition are the following factors:

1) Individual learner differences which include: age, formal education level, motivation, learner’s aim/purpose for studying the L2.

2) An individual’s interlanguage using Dr. Elaine Tarone’s research.

We learned about the five cognitive processes that lead to learner errors. (native language transfer, overgeneralization, transfer of training, strategies of learning, strategies of communication)

We learned about the order of acquisition of a language. Each learner has a built-in syllabus which means that the syllabus that a teacher presents over the course of a semester is most likely not going to line up with each learner’s developmental stage. However, there are instructional and mediational activities that can implemented to scaffold each learner’s development.

What does SLA tell us about how people acquire a second language? Since the conditions are not the same as when the learner acquired her first language we need to analyze her language to understand how to shape our classroom tasks/activities, at home tasks/activities, how and when to provide feedback, etc.

Interlanguage (IL), a term coined by Selinker in 1972, is the language/linguistic system available to a learner as she studies and learns a second language. The “inter” prefix is interesting because it refers to being in between learning about language-talking about language (usage) and acquiring it-using language in an automatic fashion (using). The distinction between these two terms is key. Learning is still conscious, explicit knowledge, and acquisition refers to implicit (unconscious) knowledge or automaticity.

Now the line between these two kinds of knowledge is slippery and is debated among linguists-some do not see any kind of overlap or interface between the two knowledge bases (Krashen) while others believe in the dynamic nature of this interface. That is, learning does impact acquisition.

What impact does this debate have on the classroom instructional experience? The advent of sociocultural theory embraces the positive impact that interaction has on learners. The communication act between people mediates learning and development. (This happens all of the time when you learn your native language, L1.) That is to say, that interaction stimulates the interface between the monitor-explicit knowledge and universal grammar-implicit knowledge so that the former leads to the latter.
How we can be “active” teachers, or more active, as the case may be? We cannot rely on textbooks to most effectively guide learners on the best journey to second language acquisition. Why? Most books tend to focus on grammar features or functions in a certain order, and to focus on content that the authors believe to be stimulating.

Now we know that every classroom needs to address the “highly situated and interpretive nature of teaching (Johnson, p. 3, 8). There are many factors that shape a classroom that a teacher often cannot control such as class size, a required textbook, etc. However, she can learn about the students in her classroom,

She can also analyze and interpret the learner language of her students to modify classroom practices accordingly. First she needs to have an understanding of SLA research from the mid 20th century to the present.

What do we want (should we) assess in students? Accuracy, fluency and complexity.

We were presented with the St. Olaf model. At the intermediate level they went from a grammatical syllabus to content-based teaching so that they could fuse content and academic language. We learned about BICS=basic interpersonal communication skills and CALP=cognitive academic language proficiency and how a focus on content leads to developing critical thinking skills in the L2.

This five day summer institute has dramatically impacted how I conceptualize our Spanish language curriculum at Smith, specifically the first four semesters in it. I have already implemented some changes in a course I teach with two other colleagues and for which I do most of the coordination. These changes take time and so I will be integrating more ideas this summer.