Theories and Research:
Sed de Saber® as an Adult Language Acquisition Program

Highlights and insights from leading researchers and publications

Sed de Saber®

Executive Summary

Sed de Saber is an English language program for Hispanic adults who have limited English proficiency. It is a portable, self-paced program that teaches English to Spanish-speaking adults for the purpose of improving communication in the home, workplace and community. Based upon the latest scientific research on adult learning processes and second language development, Sed de Saber pinpoints the key components of effective English language development ensuring positive results in four months with 30 minutes of study per day, aiming to increase learner confidence in an entertaining and simple way. Beginners acquire vocabulary, improve pronunciation, and develop grammatical awareness through Sed de Saber's playback and record function. Learners become aware of knowing how, when and where to say what to whom—this is emphasized throughout every book in the six-book sequence. Sed de Saber users can be assured of a successful language learning experience that is enjoyable, effective and straightforward.

Sed de Saber - Introduction

Sed de Saber is an English language program for Hispanic adults who have limited English proficiency. It is a portable, self-paced program that teaches English to Spanish-speaking adults for the purpose of improving communication in the home, workplace and community. Based upon the latest scientific research on adult learning processes, Sed de Saber pinpoints the key components of effective English language development, ensuring positive results in four months with 30 minutes of study per day. Its interactive games and activities are engaging while its native language support increases learner confidence every step of the way.

Acquiring a Second Language

Second language learners progress through recognizable stages as they learn English. While the time spent in each stage may vary, every learner passes through the following developmental stages. English language learners in the pre-production stage may have up to 500 words in their listening vocabulary. Learners at this stage are able to respond to pictures and other visuals, therefore benefiting greatly from listening to comprehension activities and building a receptive vocabulary. Learners in the early production stage will develop a receptive and active vocabulary of about 1,000 words. During this stage, learners usually speak in one- or two-word phrases. Listening activities supported by pictures that focus on key vocabulary and concepts further develop the ability to communicate in English.

By the time speech begins to emerge, learners have developed a vocabulary of about 3,000 words and are able to communicate with simple phrases and sentences. Learners at this stage typically ask simple questions that may or may not be grammatically correct. English language learners at the intermediate fluency stage generally have a vocabulary of 6,000 active words and are beginning to use more complex language patterns. They are willing to express their opinions and share their thoughts as well as ask for clarification when they do not fully understand. By the time learners reach advanced fluency, they function at a near-native level in cognitive academic language proficiency (Haynes, 2007).

speech begins to emerge

According to research, there are two independent systems of second language performance: the acquired system and the learned system. Acquisition is that which results from natural language use, where the learner's attention is focused on meaning rather than form. For example, knowing that "a red rose" is grammatically correct without articulating that adjectives come before nouns in English and that there is no number-gender agreement, is the effect of acquisition. This contrasts with learning where second language knowledge is the awareness of rules and applying these rules to analyze the language. According to research, learning is less important than acquisition for language function. (Krashen, 1981).

In addition to the stages of development and the acquisition-learning distinction, cognitive and literacy skills established in the native language transfer across languages (Cummins, 2000). Generally accepted in the field of second language acquisition, Common Underlying Proficiency Theory (CULP) recognizes that what learners know in their native language can be accessed and expressed in another language once they have developed sufficient proficiency in the second language (Wong-Kam, 2004). Therefore, skills that are not directly connected to a particular language, such as subtraction, using a computer, or reading may be transferred from one language to another once the learner has the necessary second language skills (Baker, 1998).

Sed de Saber Application

Sed de Saber addresses the needs of English language learners at both the pre-and early production stages of acquisition by providing pictures and other visuals used in conjunction with listening comprehension activities in order to build a receptive vocabulary. Native language support also guides beginning learners through the materials, ensuring comprehension each step of the way. Because communicative function is the goal of Sed de Saber users, learners acquire English efficiently without exhausting time and energy learning rules of grammar. Beginners improve their pronunciation, acquire more vocabulary, and develop better grammatical awareness through Sed de Saber's playback and record function—they can listen to their own English improving.

*In order to attain language by the acquisition system (natural use focusing on meaning rather than form) versus the learning system (awareness of rules and analysis of grammar), Sed de Saber provides numerous visual aids as well as native language support. English is learned efficiently with grammatical awareness developing as pronunciation and vocabulary advance.

acquisition

The Communicative Approach

The goal of the communicative approach is communicative competence which is essentially the knowledge of how, when and where to say what to whom. This approach focuses on the need to express and understand various functions such as requesting, describing, expressing likes and dislikes, and so on. It also emphasizes the processes of communication, particularly focusing on the importance of language for social interaction with other people (Richards, 1992).

The communicative approach has learners realizing pragmatic meaning by applying the language learned to actual communication. This is crucial to language learning and leads to the development of true fluency in the second language (DeKeyser, 1998; Ellis, 2005). In addition, "engaging learners in activities where they are focused on creating pragmatic meaning is intrinsically motivating" (Ellis, 2005). Therefore, optimal learning must be both interesting and relevant allowing the acquirer to focus on the practical meaning, not on the form, of the message (Krashen, 1985).

Considering the needs and goals of the adult second language learner, the best methods supply comprehensible input containing information that serves a purpose in the life of the learner.

"These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are ready, recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production." (Krashen, 1987). High-quality comprehensible input—information that serves a purpose in the life of the learner–teaches learners much more than simply the meaning of a single word—it teaches the way the word is pronounced, what it means, how it is spelled, how it works with other words in a sentence, and so on. In fact, research has shown that "if learners pay careful attention to the word's pronunciation, orthography, grammatical category, meaning, and semantic relations to other words, they are more likely to retain the word ... than if they pay attention to only

comprehensible

one or two of the above word properties" (Hulstijn, 2001). It is also well-recognized that grammar is best learned implicitly, that is by being exposed to structures many times, not by memorizing rules of grammar, and that pronunciation is improved both by listening opportunities as well as by speaking practice (Domangue, 2004; Haight, 2007; Magnuson, 1995; Truscott, 1998).

Coupled with the need for comprehensible input is the significance of meaningful practice. A key benefit of practicing a particular form or structure is increased competence in using that knowledge (Harrington, 2002).

Practice opportunities that are meaningful and tied directly to the needs of the adult learner provides him the chance to participate in the community in several ways. For example, learners with school-age children who spend time practicing introductions, filling out forms, asking and answering questions are able to participate in their child's education even before they are highly proficient in English. Learners who practice language necessary for interacting in the society will find themselves feeling a part of the community more quickly. These are the benefits of meaningful practice.

Sed de Saber Application

Sed de Saber best practices exemplify the communicative approach where communicative competence is the goal. Knowing how, when and where to say what to whom runs through every book of the six-book sequence. The lessons draw on real-life experiences, all the while building on the previous book's content. Finally, practice is always meaningfully presented in the context

of hands-on, everyday situations, never losing sight of the needs of the adult English language learner.

*Language is critical for social interaction. Sed de Saber emphasizes meaningful practice and how language integrates learners in their community so that they may feel a part of that community.

meaningful practice

Multisensory presentation of meaningful content provides the learners with the optimal condition for second language learning. "The presentation of coherent and meaningful information leads to deeper processing and that deeper informational processing results in better learning" (Anderson, 1990). One of the best ways to facilitate depth of processing is by using background knowledge to enhance the language comprehension process. Previously acquired knowledge structures accessed in the comprehension process (called schemata) provide direction for the learner to help him construct meaning from his own cognitive structure (Rumelhart, 1980). This is the essence of schema theory—the prior knowledge that the learner brings that he may connect to the new, incoming information (Fogarty, 2007).

Practice makes neural pathways, which leads to automaticity. A key benefit of practice is its effect in shifting toward increased automaticity, which leads to "greater proficiency in higher-level tasks such as comprehension and fluency than students who fail to automatize these facts" (Gray, 2000; Segalowitz, 1998). The question is—how does the learner's brain automatize basic language skills? According to research, "in early stages of learning, neural circuits are activated piecemeal, incompletely, and weakly.

It is like getting a glimpse of a partially exposed and very blurry photo. With more experience, practice, and exposure, the picture becomes clearer and more detailed. As exposure is repeated, less input is needed to activate the entire network. With time, activation and recognition are relatively automatic, and the learner can direct her attention to other parts of the task" (Genesee, 2000).

Sed de Saber Application

Sed de Saber's methodology was created with an understanding of how adults best acquire second languages. Each book provides multiple opportunities for learning– always keeping in mind the goal: communicative competence in English. The lessons are simultaneously auditory and visual, connected to work and social life, family as well as the greater community. Learners cannot help but access prior knowledge with Sed de Saber thus developing the neural pathways and automaticity necessary for transferring skills and knowledge from Spanish to English.

*Sed de Saber's multisensory presentation is based upon the research which finds that optimal learning and deepest processing occurs when learning takes place with both auditory and visual stimuli.

multisensory

While learning a second language can be challenging at any age, people are often surprised to learn that adult second language learners typically achieve basic proficiency in the new language more rapidly than younger learners. In fact, older learners have some advantages over children. First, they already know one language (and sometimes more than one) quite well. Second, they are typically better at intentional learning, which means they often have study strategies, mnemonic devices, literacy skills, and other resources to utilize. Older learners are better at algebra or history; we should not be surprised that they are faster second-language learners (Snow, 2002). The reality is, children do not have to learn as much as an adult to achieve communicative competence. That is why there remains the illusion that children learn English as a second language more easily than adults. However, when controlled research is conducted, in both formal and informal learning situations, results typically indicate that adult (and adolescent) learners perform better than young children (McLaughlin, 1992).

While adults may be better second language learners than children, nothing is more detrimental to the learning process than the anxiety often related to learning. Low self-esteem along with debilitating anxiety can combine to raise the affective filter and form a mental block that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition.

On the other hand, learners with self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. (Krashen, 1987). It is, in fact, well-documented that positive affect influences a broad range of cognitive processes, including cognitive flexibility, verbal fluency, and problem solving. All of these functions are important when learning a second language (Dreisbach, 2004).

One highly-successful way to lower the affective filter during the learning process is by the introduction of humor. Research has shown that the use of humor in the classroom reduces tension, improves classroom climate, increases enjoyment, and even facilitates learning (Chaisson, 2002). Providing a story line, characters, places, actions, themes, and so on makes language learning more entertaining, engaging, and effective (Valdez). Reappearing characters offer opportunities to personalize material, taking the learner painlessly from reception to production.

In the case of adult second language learners, confidence is directly related to the level of communicative competence achieved by the learner. Providing them with research-based materials that recognize the needs of the adult, teaching effectively as well as efficiently, and entertaining without losing sight of the goal leads to increased learner confidence. Having spent 30 minutes per day for four months, Sed de Saber users can be confident in their communicative competence.

advanced fluency

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Sed de Saber Application

Sed de Saber's engaging, self-paced materials provide adult learners with multiple opportunities to learn through record and playback functions, plus interactive games and activities that build confidence and make learning English fun. Through the use of a storyline with characters, places, actions and themes, Sed de Saber users can be assured of a successful language learning experience that is appealing, effective, and straightforward.

*Although learning a second language can be intimidating, Sed de Saber presents language learning in a fun and entertaining fashion. This reduces tension, increases practice and, ultimately, raises confidence and the level of communicative competence.

Conclusion

The Sed de Saber program was created based on current research on second language development, making it easy for Spanish-speaking adults to acquire communicative function in English thus improving communication in the home, workplace, and community. The program entails practice and repetition necessary for learning English pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. Sed de Saber applies the key findings established by the field of second language acquisition research to simple instruction–ideal for every adult Spanish speaker to learn English.

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