

Finer tunes in schools: From Learning English to using English to learn

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A lead-in question:

- What makes good language learning?

Jane Willis (1996) argues that successful language learning relies on four key conditions:

- Exposure
- Use
- Motivation; and
- Formal instruction

(Willis, J. 1996. *A framework for task-based learning*. Longman.)

Exposure

- Exposure primarily refers to language and texts the learner listens to or reads.
- Learner has to be exposed to a target language rich environment.
- Learning in such an environment is largely subconscious.
- Learning is possible when the exposure is comprehensible to the learner.

Use

- Learners need “opportunities to communicate what they want to say and express what they feel or think”.
- Through interacting with others in the target language, they can learn a range of language skills which they use to get things done.
- Use can also be understood as the language the learner produce: oral or written texts.

Motivation

- “...motivation to process the exposure they receive and motivation to use the target language as often as possible...”
- If students have no personal long-term motivation, teachers can select topics and activities that serve to motivate them in the short term.

(Formal) Instruction

■ Instruction

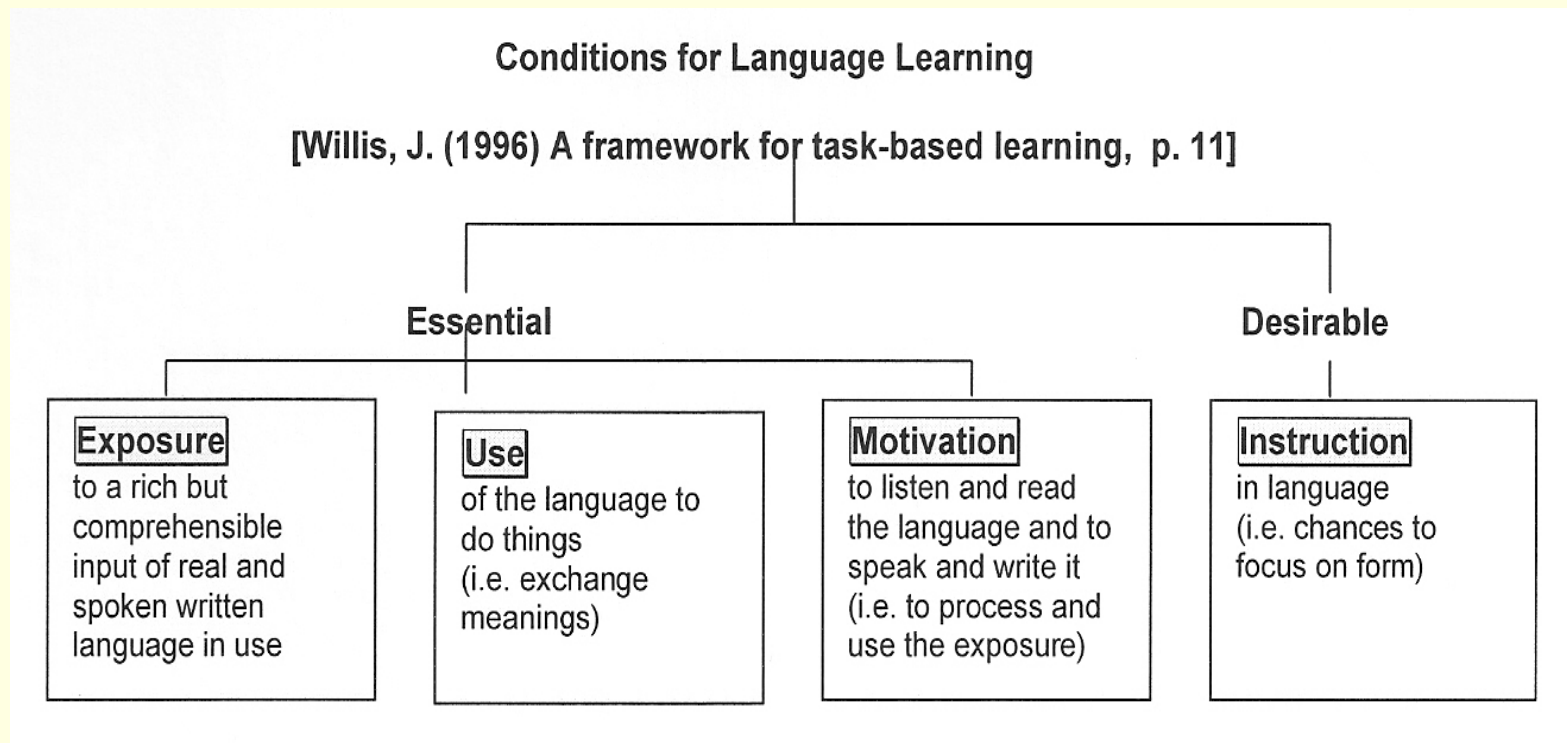
- encourages the learners to focus on language features, which in turn speed up the language development.
- raises learners' awareness of language form and language features.
- helps to address individual differences through, for example, enhancing learners' understanding of their own learning needs and learning strategies.

Necessary and desirable conditions

- Of the four conditions, only three of them are considered necessary. They are:
 - Motivation
 - Use
 - Exposure

Formal instruction is considered desirable but not necessary.

Willis' conditions for language learning



The case of Hong Kong

- While most researchers and language teachers would agree to the four conditions for effective language learning, the question many would ask:

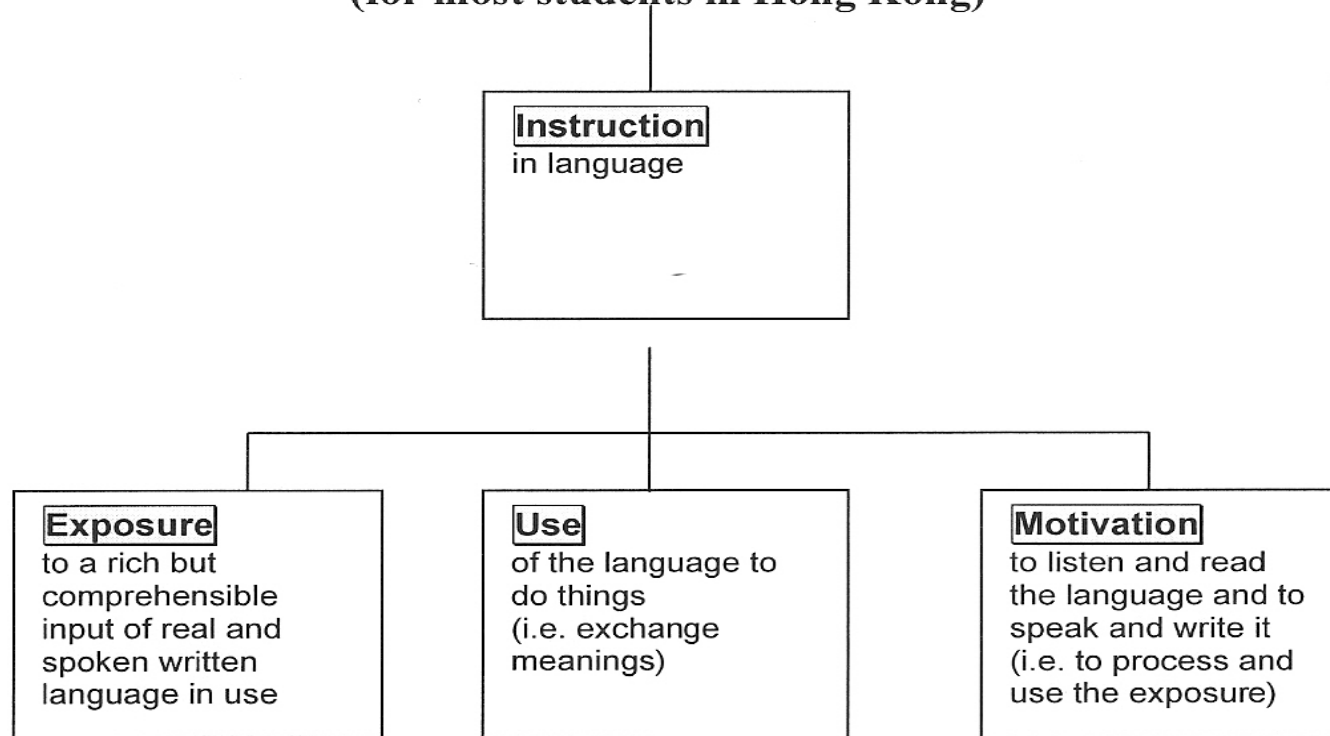
To what extent, can we apply this model of language learning to Hong Kong?

Luke & Richards (1982). *English in Hong Kong: functions and status.*

- Hong Kong was once described as a *Diglossia without bilingualism.*
- Now *Triglossia without trilingualism?*
- The Bottom line is: English is not a necessity to *access all the key social facilities in HK.*

Conditions for language learning: a revised model for most students in Hong Kong

Conditions for Language Learning (for most students in Hong Kong)



Conditions for language learning in Hong Kong

- In light of the revised model, we can re-examine the conditions for language learning in Hong Kong.
- To move forward, we may also wish to identify the disconnects in the present scenario.

Exposure at different level

- Learners' contact with English at societal level
- Learners' contact with English in the school
- Learners' contact with English in the classroom

Exposure to English

- Exposure is not as rich at societal level
- At school and classroom level, input is often not comprehensible to the learners i.e. texts most students are given in the English lessons are often way beyond their present level

Use: different uses (1)

- Using English to get things done (societal)
- Using English to pass exams (societal & school)
- Using English to complete language exercises (classroom)

Use: different uses (2)

- For many learners, English as a subject is the only channel in which they are exposed to or asked to use English
- What is learned is General English -- Everyday English (e.g. topics, themes, language points, lexis)
- Not enough emphasis on making learners produce (i) texts; (ii) different text types; and (iii) in different modes

Motivation at different levels

- Interest in attending English lessons
- English as a fun subject (integrative)
- Seeing the usefulness of English as a tool for further studies (instrumental)
- Using English to get things done

The fine-tuning of MOI initiative

- The initiative can be regarded as an opportunity to enhance the learning of English in Hong Kong if we can make adjustment in our schools to enhance
 - Learners' Exposure to English
 - Learners' opportunities to Use English
 - Learners' Motivation to learn and use English

Enhanced Exposure, Use and Motivation

- Exposure: Comprehensive Input
- Use: Extend the use of English to learning (an)other subject(s)
- Motivation: Motivation enhanced through the reduction of gap between exposure and use

In sum, the new initiative can

- help to expand students' *Exposure* to the target language;
- provide students more opportunities to *use* English in a purposeful manner;
- become a means to enhance students' *motivation* to learn English.

A way forward for teachers of English

- Look at the profession of teaching English in a wider context to take a step forward.
- Work in a collaborative manner with subject teachers to provide learners with additional opportunities to learn and use English in the school.
- Enhance teachers' own understanding of the specific nature of academic English.

Challenges for English teachers

- Can we move further away from “teach to test or exam” and adopt a more learner-centred approach?
- Overall, can we teach less English but make sure students learn and retain better?
- Can we allow class time for *English Across the curriculum*?



■ Thank you!

Challenges for English teachers

- If we move further away from “teach-to-test” and adopt a more learner-centred approach, we will be more ready to provide learners with input which is comprehensible to them.

Challenges for teachers of English

- If we try to teach less but make learners retain better, it is very likely that we can enhance learners' motivation to learn and use English.

Challenges for English teachers

- If we allow class time for English across the Curriculum, we can help learners see better the usefulness of learning English; the notion of English can be expanded from a subject to a useful learning tool.



■ Thank you!