

Approaches to language teaching in the recent past have been based on 'skill-building', the hypothesis that we develop competence in language and literacy by first 'learning about' language, that is, consciously learning the rules, and by deliberately studying vocabulary. Skill-building cannot be the major means of producing competence in language and literacy. Nearly all texts in foreign language education are based on skill-building, with presentations of grammar and vocabulary followed by very short texts and exercises designed to help the student 'automatize' the rules. They assume that children must . First consciously learn all soundspelling correspondences (phonics), and then practice applying the rules of phonics in reading simple texts. In fact, expert linguists admit that they have not succeeded in fully describing the grammatical rules of any language or the rules of phonics, and those they have come up with are often forbiddingly complicated. Correction helps us, it is claimed, by forcing us to reformulate our rules, to change our idea of the rules until we get them right. The Skill-Building Hypothesis is a delayed-gratification hypothesis. Second, there are abundant cases of those who have acquired all or nearly all of a second language but who do not have conscious knowledge of more than a handful of rules (for cases, see Krashen 1981, 2000, 2004). Third, the effect of error correction on language development has thus far been shown to be weak or nonexistent (Truscott 1996). For the public, the Skill-Building Hypothesis is not an hypothesis: it is an axiom. Most approaches to literacy development are also based on skill building. Real reading is delayed until phonics is mastered. Real language use is delayed until the rules are 'mastered'. First, the system to be consciously learned is simply too complex and has not even been completely described