Discussion Questions for Chapter 6: Second language learning in the classroom

1. Six proposals for second and foreign language teaching are described in this chapter. Have you experienced any of them as a student? As a teacher? Have you experienced other approaches that are not covered by these six?

2. What elements from each of the six approaches do you find compatible with the way you would like to learn a language in a classroom? Are there some characteristics that you especially dislike? Are your likes and dislikes the same when you think about these elements in relation to how you would like to teach a second language?

3. Review the definitions of quantitative and qualitative research in the Glossary. Think of two questions that you think could best be answered through the use of quantitative methods. Think of two that you think could best be answered by a qualitative investigation.

4. 'Communicative competence' has been defined in different ways. What are the two general meanings of this term?

5. It has been observed that students in some types of instructional approaches develop 'communicative confidence' and this is sometimes contrasted with their 'communicative competence.' What are the abilities that are being distinguished? How do you think these two kinds of ability are related?

6. How did the programme described in Example 3 and Study 16 respond to the challenge of teaching English as a second language in an area where there were few teachers who felt that they had adequate language proficiency or preparation for language teaching? What did the researchers conclude about the effectiveness of this programme? What elements might be added to strengthen it?

7. VanPatten's Processing Instruction has been the basis for numerous studies of foreign language learning by university students. What are the main elements of VanPatten's approach? What is the language learning phenomenon that this approach is designed to overcome?

8 When students engage in group work in communicative and task-based language learning, they may not always have the language resources to be able to provide each other with correct language models or corrective feedback. Nevertheless, the benefits of peer interaction outweigh the limitations. What are those benefits?

9 Describe a group-work activity that would be appropriate for a class you are teaching (or may soon teach) and explain how you would maximize the benefits and overcome some of the limitations associated with learners' lack of proficiency.

10 In a recent book, Roy Lyster, a strong supporter of content-based language teaching (especially French immersion) says that students can't really 'get two for one'. He argues that there must be a focus on teaching language as well as teaching content. What are some examples of the research that supports his argument?

11 Proponents of 'let's talk' approaches to language learning suggest that learners can discover and overcome their L2 errors and limitations when they encounter 'communication breakdown.' What are some reasons to think that this may not happen in typical foreign-language classrooms? How does this change the way you might set up interaction activities?

12 If it is not feasible to develop a teaching syllabus based on the 'teach what is teachable' approach, why is it important for teachers to be familiar with the research that underlies it?

13 Proponents of 'get it right in the end' claim that not everything has to be taught. Why not? What are the characteristics of some features that do have to be taught? Would you predict that these will be the same for learners at different ages? How might students in foreign-language and second-language settings differ with regard to what needs to be taught?

14 Proponents of 'get it right in the end' suggest that students will need some form-focused instruction and feedback on their efforts. Should that kind of focus be provided during communicative interaction or separate from it? What are some reasons for and against focusing on language itself during communication? What are some reasons for and against separate form-focused lessons?