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1-1-2009

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Todd A. Hernández

Marquette University, [todd.hernandez@marquette.edu](mailto:todd.hernandez@marquette.edu)

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Published version. *TFLTA Journal*, Vol. 1 (Fall 2009): 50-60. [Permalink](#). © 2009 Tennessee Foreign  
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## **Situating Grammar Instruction in the World Language Classroom: Four Content-Enriched Strategies**

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**Todd A. Hernández**

Marquette University

*The role of grammar instruction in promoting communicative competence continues to be a controversial issue for the world language classroom teacher. Second language acquisition research suggests that critical to sustained progress in language use is a focus on form, which we define as attention to linguistic form in the context of performing a communicative task. We therefore offer here four content-enriched strategies for situating grammar in a communicative context: textual enhancement, input flood, structured input, and dictogloss. We present these tasks and activities within the framework of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (SFL, 2006) to illustrate how a standards-based approach that integrates form-focused instruction with content increases student achievement in the target language.*

The role of grammar instruction in promoting communicative competence continues to be a controversial issue for the world language (WL) classroom teacher. Traditional grammar instruction, which often consists of an explanation of grammar rules and then manipulative exercises to practice the new structure or structures, remains prevalent in WL textbooks and classrooms (Aski, 2003; Wong & VanPatten, 2003). This is true despite the fact that traditional approaches to grammar instruction do not engage students in communicative and interactive language learning experiences. Second language acquisition research (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Swain, 1995, 1998, 2005) suggests that critical to sustained improvement in language use is a focus on form, which we define as attention to linguistic form in the context of performing a communicative task. Given the importance of integrating attention to form and meaning, I therefore offer here four content-enriched strategies for situating grammar in a communicative context: textual enhancement (TE), input flood (IF), structured input (SI), and dictogloss (DG). These activities are presented within the framework of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (SFL, 2006) to demonstrate how a standards-based approach that integrates form-focused instruction with content can increase student achievement, as well as foster motivation and interest in language learning.

### **Textual Enhancement**

TE activities, my first example, attempt to draw second language learners' attention to a specific target structure within a communicative context through the use of textual cues such as bolding and italics. TE is designed to induce students to notice and process specific target forms in the input. The guidelines for implementing TE activities in the WL classroom are:

1. *Choose an appropriate text.* The instructor should choose a text that students will be able to read for comprehension and that provides them with opportunities to notice and process the target form.
2. *Enhance the text.* The instructor should use textual cues such as bolding and italics to draw students' attention to the target form. If the text does not contain sufficient examples of the target structure, the instructor might want to increase the number of instances the form appears to give students more opportunities to notice and process it (Gass, 1997). The instructor might also give students exposure to several texts with the target form.
3. *Focus on meaning and form.* Wong (2005) points out that students must attend to both meaning and form in order for them to make form-meaning connections. Leow (2008) suggests that attention to enhanced forms should be encouraged after students have had opportunities to process a text for meaning. Furthermore, research suggests that TE is most effective when students are presented with explicit instruction in addition to exposure to the target forms (Alanen, 1995; Leow, 2008; Robinson, 1995).

Figure 1 depicts the use of TE with an authentic newspaper article to direct students' attention to third person singular preterite verbs. This task occurs within the context of a standards-based unit on the 2010 World Cup Soccer tournament to be held in South Africa. The integration of the World Cup qualification process as an ongoing thematic unit provides a meaningful context for addressing the *SFLL* as students read, view, discuss, record, and present the results of soccer matches throughout the entire semester (National Standards 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 4.2, 5.1, 5.2). Students read the text in Figure 1 and then answer the questions in Figure 2 in complete sentences in Spanish.

*Puerto España, Trinidad (AP)-Con un gol de Ricardo Clark, Estados Unidos derrotó el miércoles a domicilio 1-0 a Trinidad y Tobago y quedó a un triunfo más para conseguir su sexto boleto seguido a la Copa Mundial. Clark anotó a los 62 minutos con un soberbio remate desde 30 metros, culminando una combinación de pases de Clint Dempsey y Landon Donovan. Estados Unidos ahora suma 16 puntos en la CONCACAF. Cerrará con una visita a Honduras, el 10 de octubre, y jugará de local ante Costa Rica, cuatro días después en Washington. Trinidad se estancó con cinco puntos y quedó eliminado. Por su parte, México ahora está en segundo lugar con 15 puntos después de derrotar a Honduras. Cuauhtémoc Blanco hizo un penal en el segundo tiempo para dar la victoria de 1-0.*

*Figure 1. Estados Unidos acaricia su pase al Mundial de 2010*

1. Who won the soccer match between the U.S. and Trinidad and Tobago?
2. Where is the U.S. in the CONCACAF standings?
3. Who scored the goal in the U.S versus Trinidad and Tobago match?
4. Where is Trinidad and Tobago in the CONCACAF standings?
5. What is the meaning of *se estancó* in the context of this newspaper article?
6. Where is Mexico in the CONCACAF standings?
7. Who scored the goal in the Mexico versus Honduras match?
8. What are synonyms for *derrotó* and *anotó*?

*Figure 2.* Questions to be answered after reading text in Figure 1.

**Reflection.** After reading the newspaper article on the results of the most recent soccer match between the United States and Trinidad and Tobago, students answer questions which focus their attention on both form and meaning (Standards 1.1, 1.2, 4.1). Student attention is also drawn to form through the highlighting of preterite verb forms. Further activities might require students to read or view the results of other matches and then present this information to the class in the format of a target language television or radio newscast (Standards 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 4.1, 5.1, 5.2).

### Input Flood

My second example is IF. As with TE activities, IF attempts to make specific features of target language input more frequent and salient. With IF, the input a learner receives is saturated with numerous examples of the target structure with the expectation that this artificial increase will aid him or her in noticing and then acquiring the form (Wong, 2005). IF can be conducted with both written and oral input. VanPatten and Leiser (2006) argue that one of the advantages of IF is that it is not difficult to implement. The authors maintain that a WL teacher can inundate oral and written texts with adjective agreement, prepositions, reflexive pronouns, verb tenses, discourse markers (de la Fuente, 2009; Hernández, 2008, 2009) and others structures in order to provide learners with increased exposure to target forms. A number of empirical studies have indeed found that IF techniques have a positive impact on language learning outcomes (de la Fuente, 2009; Hernández, 2008, 2009; White, 1998; Williams & Evans, 1998). The results of these studies have suggested, however, that learners benefit most from IF activities that combine brief explicit instruction with exposure to flooded texts. Bardovi-Harlig and Reynolds (1995) recommend the use of focused-noticing activities with IF to further draw learners' attention to form-meaning relationships. Indeed, Hernández (2008) found that explicit instruction

combined with IF was more effective in promoting students' use of discourse markers to narrate a past event than IF alone.

Figures 3 and 4, taken from an intermediate-level Spanish classroom, show how a teacher might combine explicit instruction with IF to draw student attention to the important function of discourse markers in narrating a past event (Standards 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 4.1). A speaker uses discourse markers to sequence and structure ideas and information in paragraph-length discourse in order to produce a cohesive and coherent narration—an important feature of advanced language competence. de la Fuente (2009) and other researchers point out that observational data from third- and fourth-year WL classes indicate that learners often do not incorporate appropriate discourse markers into their speech even after several semesters of exposure to target language input. Because of their lack of salience for language learners, discourse markers are thus an excellent candidate for input-focused practice activities. The activities presented here demonstrate how a WL teacher can connect input- and output-oriented practice through a sequence of communicative tasks that maximize student participation and language acquisition (Standards 1.1, 1.2, 4.1). In Figure 3, students read an e-mail from a friend who recounts for them an amusing incident that happened to a classmate. In Figure 4, students answer questions in Spanish about the e-mail.

*No vas a creer lo que le pasó a mi amiga Olivia el otro día. Primero, llegó tarde a la universidad...más o menos a las 12:45 de la tarde. Al llegar tarde estaba nerviosa porque tenía un examen de historia a la una. Por eso, decidió estacionar su auto en el estacionamiento de la universidad para ahorrar tiempo. Sin embargo, estaba por entrar en el estacionamiento cuando se dio cuenta de que no tenía efectivo. Así que tuvo que ir a un ATM para sacar dinero. Después de sacar el dinero, volvió al estacionamiento donde finalmente pudo pagar. Entonces Olivia estacionó su auto y caminó a clase. Después de tomar el examen, Olivia volvió al estacionamiento para buscar su auto. Pero, al llegar al auto, se dio cuenta de que no tenía las llaves. Se le ocurrió a Olivia que las llaves estaban en el auto. Por lo tanto decidió hablar con la gente de seguridad que trabajaba ahí en el estacionamiento para saber si podía ayudarla. Después de explicar lo que le había pasado, la gente de seguridad ofreció abrirle la puerta del auto para que pudiera sacar las llaves. Sin embargo, mientras el señor estaba abriendo el auto, Olivia descubrió que, al final, no había dejado las llaves en el auto. ¡Las llaves estaban dentro de su mochila! Así que sacó las llaves de su mochila para abrir el auto. ¡Por eso ahora nosotros le decimos "Olivia la olvidadiza!"*

*Figure 3. Olivia la olvidadiza.*

1. What time did Olivia arrive to MU?
2. Why was she nervous?
3. What did she do?
4. Why did she have to go to the ATM?
5. What did Olivia realize when she returned to her car?
6. What did she do?
7. What happened while the employee was opening her car?
8. How did Olivia earn her nickname?

*Figure 4.* Questions to be answered after reading text in Figure 3.

**Reflection.** In Hernández (2009), students responded to questions concerning the content of the reading passage, and were then directed to underline preterite and imperfect verbs and discourse markers in order to encourage noticing and processing of the target forms. Responses to both activities were reviewed with the teacher. Students then performed a series of three information gap activities that provided them with practice in narrating a series of events in the past. The first task required students to exchange information about an unfortunate incident that happened to a friend. Students then exchanged narratives concerning a disastrous spring break vacation in the second task. In the third task, students had to situate a series of events in chronological order. The teacher asked students to direct their attention to the preterite and imperfect, as well as to the appropriate use of discourse markers in narrating the events in each of these information gap activities. Post-task activities required students to report the results of their communicative exchanges to the class, and thus presented the teacher with further opportunities to focus student attention on both the preterite and imperfect and discourse markers within a meaningful context.

### Structured Input Activities

SI activities, the third example, have received much attention as an alternative to traditional grammar instruction. SI activities are a component of processing instruction (PI). PI consists of three aspects: (1) explicit information about the target form; (2) information about input processing strategies; (3) SI activities (Farley, 2005; Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Here we will focus on SI activities. The reader is encouraged to consult Lee and VanPatten (2003) for a more detailed discussion on PI. SI activities seek to draw second language learners' attention to form-meaning relationships and thus assist them in better converting input into intake. With SI activities, the input is structured to make specific target forms more salient and frequent, and input-focused activities are designed to induce students to notice and process these forms. VanPatten and Cadierno (1993) found that PI was superior to traditional approaches to grammar instruction: explicit presentation of grammar rules and output practice consisting of mechanical, meaningful, and communicative exercises. The positive results of PI were then confirmed in a series of replication studies in French, Italian, and Spanish (Benati, 2004; Farley, 2004; Sanz & Morgan-Short, 2004; Wong, 2004). Lee and VanPatten (2003) outline the guidelines for developing SI activities:

1. *Present one form or structure at a time.* The instructor should present one grammar rule or form of a paradigm at a time. The authors state that this allows the teacher to give a brief and focused grammar presentation and explanation of the most relevant aspects of the grammar structure needed to complete the learning task. This, in turn, enables the students to better direct their attention toward the target item.
2. *Keep meaning in focus.* Students should have to attend to both form and meaning in the input.
3. *Move from sentences to connected discourse.* With SI activities, it is best to begin with short sentences—which are easier for students to process—and then progress to connected discourse.
4. *Use both oral and written input.* SI activities should provide students with opportunities to receive input in oral and written modalities. As the authors observe, although all learners need oral input, some learners benefit from “seeing” input as well (p. 158).
5. *Require learners to do something with the input.* SI activities must require that learners respond to the input in order to encourage processing of the grammar. Learners indicate their comprehension of the input through Yes/No statements, agreeing/disagreeing, checklists, matching, and ordering.
6. *Keep the learners’ processing strategies in mind.* Learners should focus their attention during processing on the specific grammar items and not on other elements of the sentence.

Figure 5, adapted from Farley (2005), illustrates the use of a SI task to introduce first-semester Spanish students to subject-verb agreement. The teacher explains that students will read excerpts from a recent article in a pop culture magazine about the lives and contributions of famous musicians. Students must decide whether the author of the article is referring to Bruce Springsteen or to Bono and the Edge.

	Bruce Springsteen	Bono
1...viajan por todo el mundo.	_____	_____
2...toca la guitarra.	_____	_____
3...dan conciertos para muchas personas.	_____	_____
4...escribe muchas de sus canciones.	_____	_____
5...recaudan fondos para la caridad.	_____	_____
<i>Figure 5. SI student task to practice subject-verb agreement.</i>		

**Reflection.** This SI task encourages students to attend to form in a meaningful context (Standards 1.2, 4.1). We activate students' background knowledge to enhance their understanding of the content of the task through the introduction of recognizable artists. Subsequent SI tasks might expose students to Latino or Latina musicians. The use of such tasks provides appropriate scaffolding and context to then incorporate their music (Standards 1.2, 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 5.1, 5.2).

### Dictogloss

In addition to comprehensible input, Swain (1995, 2005) argues that output is important for second language acquisition, as it (1) prompts learners to "notice the gap" between what they want to say and what they can say; (2) provides opportunities for them to formulate hypotheses about how the target language works, test these hypotheses, and then receive feedback, and (3) allows them to reflect about language in order to strengthen their awareness of form-meaning relationships (p. 69).

With this in mind, I offer the DG procedure (Wajnryb, 1990) as my fourth and final example. DG activities provide learners with opportunities for input, output, interaction, and negotiation of meaning in the target language. In a DG task, students listen to a short text containing a specific target form. Students collaborate to recreate the text, and then compare their version with the original text. Research suggests that DG activities do indeed draw students' attention to target language forms in meaningful contexts (Izumi, 2002; Kowal & Swain, 1997; Swain, 1998). Kowal and Swain (1997), for example, found evidence of noticing, hypothesis testing, and student discussion and reflection of form-meaning relationships when using the DG procedure in French immersion classrooms. The four steps for implementing DG activities as outlined in Teddick (2001) are:

1. *Preparation.* The instructor creates or finds a short text containing a specific target form. He or she discusses and models for students the processes and procedures involved in DG tasks in order to maximize participation. The instructor then directs students' attention to new language features and provides them with a brief review lesson on the target form.
2. *Dictation of Dictogloss Text.* The instructor reads the short text to students, and asks them to listen without taking notes. The text is read a second time, and students are asked to take notes in order to reconstruct the text.
3. *Reconstruction.* Students collaborate to reconstruct the text. The instructor should remind students to recreate the text so that it is as similar to the original text as possible in grammar and content.
4. *Feedback.* The instructor asks students to share their texts. The students' texts are then compared to the original text with attention and discussion focused on the target forms.

Figure 6 shows the use of the DG procedure to practice the *ir + a + infinitive* construction for expressing future events. The DG task is part of a thematic unit on Argentina.

*El viernes 15 de diciembre va a estar parcialmente nublado con una temperatura máxima de 25 grados centígrados. El sábado va a estar soleado por la mañana. Después, por la tarde, va a llover. La temperatura máxima para el sábado va a llegar hasta los 35 grados centígrados.*

Figure 6. El pronóstico para Buenos Aires.

**Reflection.** The instructor reads the semi-authentic weather report for Buenos twice (Standards 1.2, 2.2, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2). Students recreate the text and then compare it with the original version (Standards 1.1, 1.2, 4.1). The instructor draws students' attention to the use of *ir + a + infinitive* to express future events: the weather forecast (Standard 4.1). An important aspect of this listening task is also discussion of the weather in Buenos Aires and its connections to other academic areas. Discussion can focus on the inverted seasons, the conversion of Fahrenheit to Celsius, and climate and geography (Standards 3.1, 3.2). Further activities might require students to compare and contrast Argentine cities with cities in the United States. Students might also research and present a weather report in the format of a television newscast.

### Conclusion

The four content-enriched strategies presented here offer the WL teacher a strategic approach for situating grammar instruction within a meaningful context in order to promote the development of communicative competence. In integrating form-focused instruction with content, these standards-based tasks and activities have the potential for maximizing student participation and language acquisition, as well as enhancing student motivation.

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## **The Author**

Todd A. Hernández (Ph.D., University of Kansas) is Assistant Professor of Foreign Language Education and Spanish, where he teaches methods courses, second language acquisition, and Spanish language courses. He is also the Coordinator of the First-Year Spanish Language Program at Marquette University. His most recent research project examines the role of motivation in shaping speaking performance in a study abroad context. His research has been published in journals such as *Applied Language Learning*, *Foreign Language Annals*, *Hispania*, and *Modern Language Journal*.