

The Coastal Review: An Online Peer-reviewed Journal

Volume 7
Issue 1 Fall 2015- Spring 2016


Article 3

2016

Making your traditional text work: Input, Scaffolding and Communication

Andrew J. DeMil
University of Tampa, ademil@ut.edu

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Recommended Citation

DeMil, Andrew J. (2016) "Making your traditional text work: Input, Scaffolding and Communication," *The Coastal Review: An Online Peer-reviewed Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.20429/cr.2016.070103

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/thecoastalreview/vol7/iss1/3>

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Making your traditional text work: Input, Scaffolding and Communication

Cover Page Footnote

I'd like to thank all the researchers of Processing Instruction.

Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as a field addresses issues of how a second language is learned and the best practices for an instructor. Furthermore, studies in the field offer evidence on the teaching methods that promote effective language comprehension and production, and those that are unable to do so. However, many studies bring to light that textbooks used in the classroom are not providing what instructors need to promote communicative language teaching (Allen; DeMil; DeMil and Aubry; Fernández; Lally; Lee and VanPatten; Walz). Therefore, this article sets to demonstrate how to transform current practices in foreign language pedagogy to reflect the theories and research in SLA. In this article, a variety of language examples are used to help teachers of different languages relate, and it is hoped that this does not confuse or confound the main point, that instruction must happen in a meaningful way, regardless of the language taught.

Traditional Instruction

Traditional instruction (TI) is the most widespread teaching methodology in foreign language classrooms in the United States (Fernández; Wong and VanPatten). TI begins with grammar information, explanation and examples of use. TI then employs 3 types of drills to train learners to use the form: mechanical, meaningful, and communicative (Paulston), mechanical and communicative are the most prevalent (DeMil; DeMil and Aubry; Fernández; Lally).

Mechanical drills ask learners to use the correct grammatical form to complete the activity without knowing the meaning. Learners need only pay attention to grammatical cues, e.g. the subject-verb agreement to get a correct answer. The English is provided here but would not be available to the learner.

Example 1: Mechanical drill for the French passé composé (past tense)

Complete the sentence with the *passé composé*.

1. Hier, la femme _____ (voir) le garçon.
(Yesterday, the woman _____ (to see) the boy).
2. Ce matin, le garçon _____ (parler) avec sa mère.
(This morning, the boy _____ (to talk) with his mother).

Above, learners must notice the subject to conjugate the verb correctly. No understanding of meaning is necessary. These drills were originally designed to help train learners to produce the form correctly. However, this can be problematic when the form is divorced from meaning. That is, learners are practicing to write or say the form correctly. When learners are later asked to produce in a meaningful well, it becomes difficult for them, as they were never trained to do so. (Wong and VanPatten). Furthermore, this type of drill does nothing to train the learners to comprehend the meaning of the form; that is, the *passé composé* is a grammatical problem for them to complete, devoid of meaning (Cheng; VanPatten and Cadierno; VanPatten and Wong)

The next step of TI is the meaningful drill. With these drills, students respond to questions, while at the same time producing the correct form. This combines meaning and form. In other words, learners must understand the meaning of the question to answer correctly, and ideally, answer with the correct grammar. Below is an example one might find in a beginning Portuguese course. The English translation is provided here, but would not be available to the learner.

Example 2: Meaningful Drill

Answer the following questions with a complete sentence.

1. Quando começa a aula de português?
(When does Portuguese class start?)

The student answers with a sentence using the correct form of the verb, and the time (e.g. *A aula começa às 2.* 'Class starts at 2'.) This answer demonstrates the ability to use the present tense of the verb, and comprehension of the question. This type of activity is becoming more and more uncommon in modern textbooks (DeMil; DeMil and Aubry). More often mechanical or communicative drills are used to teach grammar, and, therefore, meaningful drills will not be discussed further in this article. The third and final step of TI is the Communicative drill. This drill is the culmination of the production practice and is used to teach learners to speak in groups. This drill has learners use the correct form, but also stating a yes/no type answer, based on the speaker's life. The activity below is an example one might see in a beginning Spanish course that teaches the preterit. The English translation is provided here, but would not be given to the learner.

Example 3: Communicative drill

Talk in groups about what you did yesterday. Use the preterit.

Modelo: comer en un restaurante

(Model: to eat in a restaurant)

Student 1: Ayer, ¿comiste en un restaurante?
(Yesterday, did you eat in a restaurant?)

Student 2: Sí, comí en un restaurante/No, no comí en un restaurante.
(Yes, I ate in a restaurant. /No, I didn't eat in a restaurant.)

1. hablar con la madre (talk with your mother)
2. nadar en la playa (swim at the beach)

When carried out in class, it appears learners are communicating. However, just because students are speaking to each other, does not automatically indicate communication. It is often the case that the students are merely ignoring the meaning and listening for the verb form. For example, if the above drill is modified using non-sense words, the learners are still able to complete the activity.

Example 4: Mechanical drill with non-sense words

Ejemplo: tomer en un reparante

(Example: to tomer in a reparante' [nonsense])

Student 1: *Ayer, ¿tomiste en un reparante?*
(Yesterday, did you tomer in a reparante?)

Student 2: *Í, tomí en un reparante./bNo, no tomí en un reparante.*
(Yes, I tomered in a reparante. /No, I didn't tomer in a reparante.)

As demonstrated above, once analyzed, it is easy to see that this type of drill is also is mechanical. There is no exchange of meaning. When learners are later questioned, where, when, with whom, following a communicative drill, learners often reveal they don't know what the sentence means, even though the form was correct. This is not to say that some learners would not understand the meaning, but the drill does not require comprehension for learners to complete.

This traditional methodology has several issues that are not in line with what is known about Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Learners produce language before comprehending what they are saying and what the grammatical form communicates, which can lead to overgeneralization of a form, incorrect use (Lightbown). Second, training learners to connect form to meaning is missing, and therefore, learners do not have the necessary skills necessary to understand and speak a language. "There is sufficient evidence to discard mechanical drills from instructional practice." (Wong and VanPatten 403). However, in the 11 years since this article was published, there has been little change in the methodology of language teaching. Therefore, the aim of this article is to show instructors how to modify traditional mechanical and communicative drills into effective language learning tools that promote comprehension, production, and communication.

Input and Output

Input, or language that a learner hears or reads to comprehend a message, drives language acquisition; without input, acquisition simply cannot take place; (White). There is no theory of Second Language Acquisition that does not have a crucial place for input. Input forms the underlying language system and is available to learners in order for them to be able to produce output, i.e. speaking and writing. (Gass and Mackey). Output allows learners to practice fluency, as well as helps them discover what they lack in linguistic knowledge, and helps them discover misunderstandings (Swain and Lapkin; VanPatten). However, Input is solely responsible for modifying the underlying language system. As Vanpatten states “A good deal of acquisition is dependent upon learners correctly interpreting what a sentence means.” (115). In other words, when learners hear or read a sentence, they use underlying strategies to interpret, or sometimes misinterpret the meaning. This language is then available for output, to test hypotheses, and communicate meaning to others. Therefore, without input, there is no language available for output. This is very important when considering language pedagogy. If language acquisition begins with Input, it follows that instruction should as well.

Processing Instruction

Processing Instruction (PI) is a method of grammar teaching that trains learners to “process” input, i.e. comprehend language. PI does this by designing *structured input* (SI) activities in which learners must notice and comprehend the grammatical form to understand the message. Below is a sample SI activity for the French *passé composé*. The English is provided here but is not available to the learner.

Example 5: SI activity

Instructions: Mark when the action happened [*aujourd'hui* 'today' or *hier* 'yesterday'] and then mark *Vrai* 'True' if the sentence describes the drawing, or *Faux* 'False' if it does not.

Le garçon a parlé. *aujourd'hui / hier* *vrai/faux*
(The boy spoke)



La femme écoute. *aujourd'hui / hier* *vrai/faux*
(The woman listens.)



As you can see, the learner decides the tense and meaning based on the verb form. There are no temporal adverbs, e.g. *Hier* (yesterday), to clue the learner in to the time of the action, and the learner must rely on the verb for meaning (True or False) and form (today/yesterday). This simple exercise demonstrates comprehension of grammar and meaning without production, the first step in communication that is meaningful comprehension.

PI and TI

As demonstrated above, PI focuses on comprehension of language input and trains them to better comprehend language. TI begins with mechanical production, and skips comprehension to develop the underlying linguistic system, and output (*meaningful* production in order to communicate). Many studies offer evidence that PI is more effective than TI when teaching learners to comprehend written and spoken Spanish, (Cadierno;

Cheng; Leaser and DeMil; VanPatten and Cadierno) Italian, (Benati) French (VanPatten and Wong), and English (Benati and Lee).

Furthermore, learners trained with PI also perform as well or better than learners trained with *meaningful* output instruction (MOI), a type of instruction in which learners produce language that communicates meaning. When compared empirically, learners trained with PI perform as well, if not better, than MOI (Benati; Farley; Farley; Morgan-Short and Bowden). In short, beginning with language comprehension improves overall comprehension and production of the language better than TI, and other methodologies.

Previous Studies on Grammar presentation in L2 Textbooks

Researchers have observed that the majority of foreign language and English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks include TI as the main or sole type of instruction. Most activities were mechanical drills and most production was mechanical, e.g. "listen and repeat" exercises (Aski; Ellis; Islam). Walz observed that that drills used for communication were simply mechanical drills disguised in a communicative context. Walz recommended that exercises should lead to more communicative situations, start with forced choice when interpreting language (as SI activities do, though they had not yet been developed), and there should be a majority of communicative exercises, rather than mechanical or meaningful drills. Lally examined 6 beginning French textbooks to find that half of the books had a preponderance of mechanical drills, (Lally). Fernández found that in 6 top-selling elementary Spanish university level textbooks, the prominent features were explicit information and controlled production practice, i.e. TI (Fernández). Only half provided aural input as main activities, that is, only half provided learners the opportunity to process or comprehend the form. According to Fernández, "at least half of the textbooks...overlook what is currently know in SLA: the central role of input in the development of an L2 grammar." (165)

DeMil looked at intermediate Spanish University texts. In 7 texts, the majority implement TI. The main type of exercise used to teach grammar were mechanical and communicative drills. The majority of these drills were placed in a context, such as travel, health, etc., but did not lead to communication.

Finally, DeMil and Aubry looked at 6 beginning level University French texts. Of the 6 texts, only 3 had any exercises that used input, the starting point of language acquisition. The majority of these exercises with input came from 1 text; half had more communicative drills than mechanical drills, but of all the communicative drills, only 3 had a steps leading to the demonstration of communication.

Scaffolding

If learners need to start with input comprehension, and lead to output, how will they do so? As demonstrated above, speaking does not automatically equal communication. Lee and VanPatten, (2003) point out "it is important *not* to mistake 'getting or exchanging information' as the purpose of the task". (62). What *is* the purpose of the exchange of information? "Learners will not only get and exchange information--they will *do something with it*." (62). In DeMil and DeMil and Aubry the majority of activities were lacking this final step, having students do something with the information that they received from another. For example, an activity can have students make judgments about another based on what the information exchanged (My classmate is an [active/sedentary] person because...). This final step demonstrates communication.

Just asking the students to make a statement based on what was heard does not provide learners with the necessary skills to do so. As can be seen below, if students are asked to complete a sentence such as the example below, it becomes easier for the student

to demonstrate communication of the information exchanged with a classmate. The example below is in English and could be used in any language taught.

Example 6

Step 1. Mark Yes/No to indicate what you did last weekend: Yes/No

1. I went to the store to buy clothes.
2. I ate in a restaurant.
3. I read a book.
4. I studied at the library.
5. I exercised at the gym.
6. I went to the beach.

Step 2. Share what you did and did not do last weekend, e.g. I went to the beach. And you?

Step 3. Now that you have spoken in groups, complete the sentence below. My classmate (name) had a(n) (active/sedentary) weekend, because (he/she)...**went to the beach.**

As you can see above, the underlined information is what was exchanged in groups. Students, without having to produce the sentence alone, are aided by this *scaffold* sentence, in order to demonstrate comprehension. This scaffolding will help learners be able to communicate at a level that they may not yet be ready to do alone (Lee and VanPatten).

From traditional to effective

The advantages of using a text versus not having one are many: texts help organize the semester, help students follow, and can keep an entire language section teaching the same content in the same order. Transforming a mechanical drill into an effective activity that demonstrates communication can be done in a few simple steps. Wong outlines the steps for developing an effective Structured Input activity (37-38). These steps allow instructor to use the book as a base, but redesign the activities in such a way as to promote comprehension, interaction and communication. The first step is to identify the problem. The

examples below are in English, but would be in the target language (e.g. Spanish, French, German, Russian, etc.)

Example 7: Traditional Mechanical Drill

Fill in the blank with the preterit tense of the verb to talk about activities people did last week.

Last week:

1. I _____ (to cook) one meal a day.
2. Juan _____ (to prepare) lunch at home.
3. You _____ (to drink) water at dinner.
4. Mary _____ (to dine) in a restaurant.
5. We _____ (to use) salt and pepper often.
6. They _____ (to enjoy) a lot of fatty foods.

Without getting into the specific problems learners have with the preterit form (see VanPatten 2007), this will be the form with which the new activity will be designed.

Step 2, according to Wong, is to present one thing at a time. One might think that the preterit is only one “thing” but there are lots of 'things' included in the preterit, such as all 6 subjects, e.g. I, you, he, we, etc., irregulars, stem-changers, etc. Therefore, one thing at a time means limiting the form to one person, one type of verb (-er verbs). For the example, the 'I' (1st person singular) will be used.

Example 8: Structured Input Activity: T F

Last week, I...

- ...cooked one meal a day.
- ...prepared lunch at home.
- ...ordered water at dinner.
- ...dined in a restaurant.
- ...used salt and pepper often.
- ...enjoyed a lot of fatty foods.

The above example focuses on the I form of the preterit, and sticks with the regular –ed formation of the past tense.

Step 3 is to keep meaning in focus. In example 8, learners cannot correctly and accurately respond true or false without knowing what the sentences mean. **Step 4**, according to Wong, is to move from sentences to connected discourse. As you can see in the examples above, the sentences are related in meaning and topic. Therefore, whether they complete the activity, or do something else with it, the sentences all connect to a theme, and can easily be used in discourse.

Step 5 is to use oral and written input. When presenting the above activity to students, the professor might read the sentences to the students and have them dictate, or simply write them on the board (PowerPoint, Projected Laptop, etc.) and have students read them alone. **Step 6** is to have learners do something with the input. Now that learners have been pushed to comprehend meaning, this is when interaction and demonstration of comprehension (i.e. communication) begin.

Example 9: Using the sentences above, converse with a classmate. Be sure to note their information.

Last week, I... ate (5) meals a day. And you?

As in the above example, learners are asked to use the input in order to interact with others. The question, “And you?” is added to the end of the sentence in order to have the students interact while still focusing on *one form*. Otherwise, the activity would get into question formation, and changing the verb from the first person I, to the second person you, which violates the 'one thing at a time' step. Finally, learners are asked to do something with the information that was exchanged with a classmate.

Example 10: Complete the sentence based on the information your classmate shared.

My classmate (Name) was (very/not very) healthy last week because (he/she)...

- ...cooked one meal a day.
- ...prepared lunch at home.
- ...ordered water at dinner.
- ...dined in a restaurant.
- ...used salt and pepper often.
- ...enjoyed a lot of fatty foods.

In the above example, learners complete a sentence that has been *scaffold* for them.

This allows them to use the 3rd person, he/she, form of the verb, without asking them to produce it. With the information, learners are asked to make a judgment based on the information exchanged. With this final step, learners have comprehended input, interacted with a classmate, and demonstrated that they have understood (comprehension); in other words, they have communicated.

Conclusion

The main instructional method present in the majority of foreign language texts is the Traditional Method, which has been outperformed in numerous studies. This study strictly defines communication as asking learners to exchange and comprehend information. Using the above format to modify the activities from these texts allows instructors to ensure communication.

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