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Second Language Research in Practice: Exploring Foreign Language Teaching

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Second Language Research in Practice presents a selection of papers delivered at the Lackstrom Linguistics Symposium in the years 2011 and 2014, by graduate students in the Masters of Second Language Teaching program at Utah State University.
Second Language Research in Practice

Exploring Foreign Language Teaching

Selected Papers from the John Lackstrom Linguistics Symposium

Volume 1

Edited by

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Preface

In 2011, as co-directors of the Master of Second Language Teaching (MSLT) program, we started the John Lackstrom Linguistics (JLL) Symposium. Our aim was to honor Dr. John Lackstrom, beloved professor and one of the founders of the MSLT program, upon his retirement, while at the same time expressing our appreciation for his support and guidance during our years of working with him. Knowing John Lackstrom’s genuine passion for teaching and learning, his unconditional commitment to the language-teaching profession, and his dedication to the MSLT program and its students, we could not think of a better way to convey our gratitude to him than organizing this Symposium in his name. Thus, the JLL Symposium, a student-run event, was first held in 2011 to provide MSLT students with a professional and academic opportunity to share their knowledge and their accomplishments in our program while honoring one of its founders.

Upon completing his PhD at the University of Washington, Dr. John Lackstrom joined Utah State University in 1970 as professor of linguistics, Spanish, and director of the Intensive English Language Institute. According to our colleague, professor Glenda Cole, during his tenure at USU, Dr. Lackstrom “designed and taught the Spanish for Business course. He also developed a Master’s degree in English with an emphasis in TESOL. That specialization eventually led to the Master of Second Language Teaching, which he created jointly with Dr. Alfred Smith.” In his four decades of teaching linguistics, Spanish, and ESL, Dr. Lackstrom influenced thousands of students, many of whom have followed in his footsteps and become avid promoters of language learning and teaching.

While he retired from active teaching four years ago, Dr. Lackstrom’s legacy continues as evidenced by the publication of the present volume. As its title announces, Second Language Research in Practice: Exploring Foreign Language Teaching brings together selected voices of MSLT students who have presented their work in the first four years of this forum.

The JLL Symposium has served as a venue for MSLT students to present their academic endeavors. They have done so alongside leading professionals in the field of second language acquisition who have joined us as keynote speakers these years. Thus, we have had the opportunity to welcome at this forum several well-known professionals, such as David Lasagabaster (Universidad del País Vasco Vitoria-Gasteiz), Mary Ann
Christison (University of Utah), Judith Liskin-Gasparro (University of Iowa), and Ofelia Wade (Utah State Office of Education). These highly-regarded professionals have been an inspiration and served as role-models for our MSLT students.

The JLL Symposium would not be possible without the joint efforts of many people who have worked hard and to whom we express our sincere gratitude. First of all, we wish to recognize the efforts of our graduate students, who took the responsibility to put together a program, presented their research at the symposium, or submitted their manuscripts to become part of this issue. Secondly, we are deeply grateful to Dr. Brad Hall, Head of the Department of Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies, whose support has made this event possible for four consecutive years. We also express our thanks to Dr. John Allen, Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, who has supported the publication of the present volume containing selected papers from the first four years of the JLL Symposium.

Second Language Research in Practice: Exploring Foreign Language Teaching has also involved the dedication, intelligence, patience, and professionalism of several individuals who deserve special recognition. In particular, we thank Aliza M. Atkin Kroek, co-editor of this volume, whose organizational skills and dependability helped us during the manuscript review process. We are also indebted to Michael Spooner, director of the Utah State University Press, whose enthusiasm and guidance throughout the process were crucial in putting this volume together.

Finally and most importantly, we thank John Lackstrom for being a colleague and a friend and for guiding us by his example. This volume is but a small tribute to his exemplary commitment to teaching and learning. His passion and professionalism have already touched thousands of students who are now multiplying his influence around the world. We are certain that his legacy will continue to touch students for generations to come.

Maria Luisa Spicer-Escalante and Karin de Jonge-Kannan
Logan, Utah
Frederick Poole reviews the literature and proposes a study to test whether e-dictionaries or a traditional format are more effective in promoting incidental vocabulary learning. Presented at the 2014 symposium.

The Effects of E-Dictionaries on Incidental Vocabulary Learning When Reading Chinese

A Study Proposal

Frederick J. Poole

ABSTRACT

To become proficient readers of Chinese, learners must identify characters quickly and accurately. Those able to recognize characters rapidly are able to focus on the overall message rather than the meaning of individual characters. For novice character learners, the complex orthography can be challenging. E-dictionaries such as Dim Sum and NJstar have been touted as solutions to ease this burden for second language learners of Chinese (Shen & Tsai, 2010; Xie & Tao, 2009) because research shows that when learners use these tools, reading speeds and comprehension scores improve. While some studies show the benefits of these tools, no research has compared the long-term retention of vocabulary learned via such tools. Because some e-dictionary using students simply glance at a character without focusing on the character form, reading print-based texts may be more efficient for memorizing vocabulary since learners must engage in some level of form-processing to look up an unknown character. This paper will propose a study to compare long-term vocabulary retention of incidentally learned words when reading with an e-dictionary compared with reading in traditional print format.

Keywords: Chinese, incidental learning, e-dictionary
INTRODUCTION

This study aims to determine the effectiveness of e-dictionaries in building and retaining incidentally learned vocabulary for second language learners of Chinese. Although other studies have observed the effects of e-dictionaries on reading speeds and reading comprehension (Hong, 1997; Wang, 2009, 2012), they have not observed the long-term retention rates of vocabulary learned incidentally with an e-dictionary. Furthermore, since pre-tests were not administered in the studies, which observed vocabulary growth, it is unclear whether vocabulary development actually occurred.

For this study, the terms e-gloss and e-dictionary are used interchangeably because the e-dictionary used in this study (Dim Sum) also functions as an e-glossing tool. In addition to Dim Sum, Wenlin and NJstar are commonly used e-dictionaries mentioned in other studies observing the effect of e-dictionaries on the Chinese reading process. All three of these programs enable readers to access a browser to view definitions and pinyin (phonetic transcriptions of Mandarin pronunciations) by simply hovering over a Chinese character.

Researchers have suggested that e-dictionaries may be useful in overcoming the obstacle of learning to read Chinese characters because they speed up the process of determining the meaning of unknown words (Shen & Tsai, 2010; Xie & Tao, 2009). In addition to increasing reading speed, e-dictionaries may also reduce anxiety caused by reading in Chinese (Zhao, Guo, & Dynia, 2013). Finally, several studies have indicated that e-dictionaries improve reading comprehension scores and reading speeds (Hong, 1997; Wang, 2009, 2012; Wang & Upton, 2012).

Much of the aforementioned research has focused on the benefits of e-dictionaries. However, before promoting e-dictionaries as a cure-all for all Chinese learners, a few issues must be addressed. First, e-dictionaries inhibit readers from guessing definitions from context clues. Secondly, learners generally do not need to segment characters to form words as the software does this automatically. Finally, since developing vocabulary incidentally is one of the major benefits of second language reading, using an e-dictionary to read a text in Chinese can be disadvantageous since learners may lend less attention to unknown vocabulary words. Traditionally, reading requires readers to look up unknown words, which forces the short-term memory to temporarily process and store the new word. This is bypassed when using an e-dictionary such as Dim Sum. According to Craik and Tulving (1975), depth of processing is directly related to the retention of vocabulary, and thus it may be hypothesized that vocabulary looked up in a traditional format would more likely be retained. This paper will concentrate on this final
issue of whether e-dictionaries have a negative impact on the retention of incidentally learned vocabulary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading in Chinese

For learners who have little to no experience with logographic writing systems, learning Chinese characters can be both intimidating and challenging. One aspect that makes learning Chinese characters so difficult is the lack of a reliable link between the character’s visual form and its pronunciation. Almost 90% of the most commonly used Chinese characters are compound characters (Wang et al., 1986), which means that they contain a phonetic and semantic radical. These radicals are often utilized by native speakers to help them remember and guess vocabulary meaning and pronunciation (Feldman & Siok, 1999; Hayes, 1988). However, these radicals are not reliable cues, and in fact only 26% of phonetic radicals provide exact phonetic representations of the actual character (Fan, Gao, & Ao, 1984). Segmenting characters to form words presents another problematic aspect of reading Chinese. A majority of Chinese words are formed by the combination of two or three characters; however unlike many other languages, Chinese does not employ spaces to separate individual words. When segmenting incorrectly, learners experience failure in comprehension. Recognizing characters and then parsing the characters to form words represent bottom-up processing struggles that learners experience when reading Chinese.

Struggles with bottom-up processing skills can also affect top-down processing skills. Everson (1994) argues that because learners spend so much time decoding Chinese characters, they are unable to focus on other aspects of the text, such as meaning and grammatical forms. Not surprisingly, Sheng and Jiang (2013) found that learners who were able to recognize and segment characters accurately and quickly were more proficient readers of Chinese. Emphasizing the importance of reading speed, they conclude that, “oral reading fluency is an important factor for reading comprehension in Chinese” (p. 17). Shen and Jiang also argue that once learners are able to read fluently, they are able to lend more attention to understanding the text, and thus, increase comprehension. Finally, in a study investigating the strategies employed by American learners of Chinese, Lee-Thompson (2008) found that learners overwhelmingly used bottom-up strategies rather than top-down strategies, with 5,189 occurrences of bottom-up strategies compared to 707 occurrences of top-down strategies. Lee-Thompson cites
this disparity in strategy use when commenting on learners’ problems with reading Chinese text. Again, it can be concluded that learners of Chinese tend to struggle with basic decoding skills and are thus unable to attend to other aspects of the text.

The research regarding reading in Chinese provides strong support for the use of an e-dictionary like Dim Sum. Since Dim Sum allows looking up words instantaneously, readers are able to spend less time and effort decoding and more time on understanding the text. Also, because Dim Sum automatically segments words, it is possible that this function could aid learners in developing segmenting skills. These are two important skills that may be facilitated by reading with an e-dictionary. However, simply understanding the text is not the only goal for reading in a foreign language. In the following section, I will address what some argue to be the main benefit of reading in a foreign language: incidental vocabulary learning.

**Incidental Vocabulary Learning through Extensive Reading**

Research discussed in the previous section demonstrates that second language learners wishing to become successful readers of Chinese need to improve vocabulary knowledge and character recognition speed. While some researchers argue for the effectiveness of intentional vocabulary learning methods, others argue that vocabulary learned incidentally through reading is actually more efficient than intentional methods (Huckin & Coady, 1999; Krashen, 2004). Huckin and Coady define incidental learning as a secondary learning that is “a by-product, not the target, of the main cognitive activity” (p. 182) and argue that this method is more efficient because learners simultaneously develop reading skills and build vocabulary size. Finally, Huckin and Coady argue that learning vocabulary through reading, rather than through memorizing vocabulary lists, is more advantageous due to contextualization of the vocabulary.

Research on extensive reading vocabulary gains indicates that learners can also experience significant gains in the development of partial word knowledge as well as lexical access speed (Grabe & Stroller, 2002; Horst, 2005; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006). Pigada and Schmitt found that after an extensive reading program, students demonstrated having learned 65.4% of the targeted vocabulary at least to some degree. Horst’s study on extensive reading vocabulary learning indicates that new knowledge was gained on more than half of the unknown words in the reading material. Finally, Horst, Cobb, and Meara (1998) found that learners were able to recall one of every five new words that they had learned incidentally.

These studies clearly show that incidental learning occurs in extensive reading; however, as Huckin and Coady (1999) point out, “extensive read-
ing for meaning does not lead automatically to the acquisition of vocabulary” (p. 183). Many factors could contribute to the incidental acquisition of words. The context in which the incidentally learned word appears, for example, can greatly affect the likelihood that a word is noticed. Nation and Coady (1988) point out that the context of a passage could allow a reader to completely bypass any processing of a word because the content is understandable without knowing the definition. On the other hand, Liu and Nation (1985) found that learners who understand 96% of the text are better at guessing unknown words than learners who understand only 90% of the text. Huckin and Coady claim that the nature of the learner’s attention span and task demands could also play a role in the incidental acquisition of new vocabulary words.

In sum, the research clearly shows that incidental vocabulary learning is a major benefit of second language reading. If incidental vocabulary learning is a main goal of second language reading, determining the effectiveness of an e-dictionary as a tool to support reading in Chinese must consider factors that lead to incidental vocabulary learning.

Previous Studies on E-glosses/E-dictionaries for Chinese

The few studies that have examined the use of e-dictionaries for second language learners of Chinese have focused on comprehension scores and reading speeds, although two studies appear to have measured vocabulary building (Hong, 1997; Wang, 2009; Wang, 2012; Wang & Upton, 2012).

Comparing the effects of multimedia software on reading comprehension and speed, Hong (1997) found that second language learners scored an average of 38% higher on the comprehension tests when reading with the assistance of an online gloss provided in the software. She also noted that readers using the online glosses were able to finish texts in less than half the time.

In a study using a similar e-dictionary to the one used in this study, Wang (2012) attempted to measure the vocabulary learning and comprehension scores of intermediate and advanced learners. Participants were asked to read a text twice and then write a recall in English. The researcher took note of the number of lookups for each word while participants read the text. Wang concluded that intermediate learners benefited more from the e-dictionary than the advanced students, and claimed that in terms of vocabulary building, intermediate learners retained many words because they looked up 40 distinct words more than four times in the first reading, but only 6 words more than four times in the second reading. In another study using an e-dictionary, Wang and Upton (2012) found that learners who used e-dictionaries consistently scored higher in comprehension and
finished faster than those who used a traditional dictionary. In Wang and Upton’s conclusion, two important problems with e-dictionaries are pointed out. First, learners were unable to notice errors when e-dictionaries improperly segmented words. Secondly, learners typically applied only one of the multiple definitions offered by the program, hindering understanding of the text.

It is noteworthy that only Wang (2012) observed vocabulary learning. However, because the study failed to administer pre or post-tests of vocabulary, it is unclear if the words were looked up to confirm a hunch, check the pronunciation, or discover the definition. Furthermore, Wang analyzed only those words looked up more than four times. This means that if the participant looked up the word less than four times on the second reading, Wang considered that some vocabulary knowledge was learned. Finally, the study neglected to compare the learning that occurred via e-dictionary with vocabulary learned in a traditional format. Wang and Upton compared these two formats, but did not consider vocabulary learning. Previous research on the use of e-dictionaries to read Chinese have focused almost exclusively on reading comprehension scores, rarely observing long-term retention rates of incidentally learned vocabulary. This study will attempt to fill this gap in the literature.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the effect of reading a Chinese text with an e-dictionary on the long-term retention of incidentally learned vocabulary?

2. What is the effect of reading a Chinese text with an e-dictionary on the development of partial knowledge of vocabulary words?

STUDY PROPOSAL

Participants in the study will be given 10 readings at their linguistic level. The readings will be taken from The Chinese Reading World, an online graded reading system designed to enable learners to read extensively at their linguistic level (Shen & Tsai, 2010). The participants will be required to read one text per week for 10 weeks, alternating each week between reading with Dim Sum and in a print format. Since using a dictionary to look up words and check hunches has been shown to result in better vocabulary retention (Luppescu, & Day, 1993), study participants will be allowed the use of smartphone dictionaries when reading in a traditional format, and also
encouraged to use smartphone dictionaries when reading on *Dim Sum*, to confirm possible segmenting errors. Before and after each reading, participants will be given a vocabulary recognition test to establish which words were incidentally learned and the additional vocabulary knowledge that the participants gained. Words correctly labeled with *pinyin* and English on the vocabulary post-test, but not on the vocabulary pre-test, will be considered incidentally learned. If a learner was unable to correctly label the Pinyin but not the English, or vice versa on the vocabulary recognition pre-test, but is able to completely label both on the vocabulary recognition post-test, this will be considered as gaining additional vocabulary knowledge. In addition to the pre and post vocabulary recognition test, participants will also be given a reading comprehension test. While the aim of this study is not to repeat previous studies in comparing reading comprehension scores, it is important to ensure that learners understand what they have read. A delayed word recognition test will be administered two weeks after completion of the tenth reading using the incidentally learned words of each participant. To determine the effect of reading with an e-dictionary on the retention of incidentally learned vocabulary and additional vocabulary knowledge, retention rates of the words that were learned incidentally in both formats will be compared using a paired t-test.

This study will include a pre and post vocabulary recognition test to assess Wang’s (2012) claims of vocabulary learning with an e-dictionary. Wang attempted to determine the amount of vocabulary learning that occurred by observing the number of words looked up when reading a text twice. If a participant looked up a word in the first text, but not in the second text, it was concluded that the word had been learned. However, she later admitted that some of the words being looked up may have been looked up simply to confirm a hunch. Therefore, it is possible that any number of the words looked up in the first reading were words that the participant already knew. Lomicka (1998) also noted that due to the complex orthography of Chinese, learners often used a dictionary to simply confirm their beliefs about a word or character. Because Chinese characters do not offer a direct cue to the pronunciation or meaning, it is also possible that participants looked up words to confirm only the pronunciation and not the meaning.

Participants in this study will be first-, second-, and third-year students enrolled in a spring semester Chinese course at Utah State University. Participation in the study is mandatory and included in the course syllabus and all readings will be adjusted to match the linguistic levels of each class. In the pre- and post-test of vocabulary recognition, all words that appear in the reading will appear on the test, with the exception of
vocabulary words that appear in the Chinese textbook chapters the participants have covered thus far.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER STUDIES

The proposed study will fill the literature gap in regard to incidental vocabulary learning that occurs when using an e-dictionary to read Chinese. If the study concludes that there is no significant difference between the long-term retention rates of vocabulary learned via e-dictionary with those learned via traditional format, then it would imply that e-dictionaries should become a part of every Chinese as a second language program. However, if the data show that a print format provides better conditions for retaining incidentally acquired vocabulary words, then educators must re-think how and when to use these tools. Further research will be needed to gauge the impact of e-dictionaries on other reading skills for Chinese learners.

REFERENCES


Sierra Fischback and Lea Whiteley Child explore the difficulties and disconnects that separate practice from what teachers understand constitutes a communicative approach to language teaching. Presented at the 2011 symposium.

The Communicative Classroom

The Disconnect Between Theory and Practice

Sierra Fischback and Lea Whiteley Child

ABSTRACT

Research indicates that the communicative approach (CA) is the most effective method of teaching a foreign language. A communicative classroom is described as one in which comprehensible elements of language are practiced in a real world context. The focus of the classroom is to encourage interaction and communication between the students. In order to determine if the CA is being applied in university foreign language classrooms, interviews and observations were conducted to examine the application of current research on the CA. The present study includes interviews of two foreign language instructors and six observations of their classrooms. These interactions reveal important dynamics within the foreign language classroom, such as the relationship between the instructor and student, how the textbook is utilized, and the amount of target language spoken versus the amount of the native language spoken by both instructors and students. After extensive research, the underlying problem the authors detected was a disconnection between theory and practice—what instructors say or believe they do and the actual application of these principles. True communicative classrooms seem to be lacking despite the instructors’ desire to implement this approach.

Keywords: communicative approach, target language, textbook, classroom activities, Spanish, English as a Second Language

The most effective methods of helping students acquire a foreign language have been the subject of research for years. One such method is the com-
municative approach (CA) and is considered one of the most effective methods of teaching a foreign language (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, and Mandell, 2001; Bartels, 2005; Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Instructors therefore should utilize this approach in their foreign language classrooms. According to Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, and Mandell (2001), when real-world communication is the focus of the foreign language classroom, then the relevancy of the material is increased. Students attend foreign language classrooms not for the purpose of reciting grammar principles, but to be able to speak to others in the L2 (Sung, 2010). Students’ purposes for learning a foreign language might be psychosocial (meaning they have a personal interest in the language, perhaps to increase job opportunities), but in the end the student attends the class to be able to communicate (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Instructors help the students communicate by taking the role of an architect or coach, providing meaningful activities and enough grammar and vocabulary for the students to be able to perform the activity with minimal assistance (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell). Meaningful activities are those that role-play real life experiences and will help students in a practical setting. It is the instructor’s job to help keep the students on task and communicating in the L2 during the activity, but otherwise it is the students that are interacting and speaking the target language (Lee & VanPatten).

The present study was conducted in order to determine if this method is being implemented at Utah State University, specifically examining the application and importance of the textbook, target language (L2), and activities. The textbook is an important tool that can either enhance or detract from the learning experience. Use of the target language is a key feature of the communicative classroom, as well as activity design, which allows the students to practice communication. Although the observed instructors incorporated these elements in their classrooms, they failed to completely apply the CA. Based upon the present research, the authors sought to discover if teachers of foreign language implement the CA, focusing on the elements of the target language, textbook and activities.

METHODS

Four main forms of data collection are available to those studying foreign language classrooms: observation, documentation, tasks, and reports and introspection (which include interviews and questionnaires). For the purposes of this study, observation and interviews were used. Using Bartels (2005) as a model, two instructors were formally observed in the classroom
environment at Utah State University. Professor Smith is an English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor teaching an integrated skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) ESL college course. It is a multi-level class, meaning that the English proficiency of the students varies; however, the majority of them are level-two students. The second instructor, Professor Petersson, teaches Spanish at the collegiate intermediate level. He stated that the students were at varying levels of proficiency, similar to Professor Smith’s class. These instructors were later interviewed in a semi-structured manner, each with the same interview questions, in order to discover their philosophies and to what extent they believe they implement the CA in their classrooms.

Teaching Philosophies

A teacher’s philosophy describes their personal beliefs in regard to how they should teach in the classroom. A discussion of Professor Petersson’s and Professor Smith’s teaching philosophies revealed the instructors’ awareness of the benefits of the CA, as well as how they feel about implementing this method in their classrooms. While one instructor explicitly stated that his classes are communicative, the other expressed how the students are the primary concern. Professor Petersson described his philosophy as “based on the principle that students need to discover things themselves.” Professor Smith, when asked about her philosophy regarding teaching, stated that both her role as the instructor and her teaching philosophy center around the idea that she is responsible for “[figuring] out the needs of the students and giving them what they want, and what they need in the best way possible [and making] it interesting, making it applicable and true to real life.” It is her responsibility to decipher what her students need and to provide them with the necessary help through instruction.

Through the interviews and observations recorded by the authors, it was discerned that what the instructors claimed to do and what in fact occurred did not always coincide with actual classroom practice. Textbook use, the use of the target language, and classroom activities all reflect different ways in which instructors incorporate the CA in the classroom.

Relevance of the Textbook

A difficulty instructors face when incorporating the CA in the classroom is the textbook. According to Shrum and Glisan (2010), the textbook “has been at the center of the foreign language curriculum, used by teachers . . .

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1. Names used are pseudonyms.
as the framework for organizing instruction and the primary source of exercises and activities” (p. 62-63). Despite the push toward more communicative classrooms, textbooks have yet to make the complete transformation from audiolingual methods to communicative methods. Many of the activities found in textbooks are grammar focused, rather than being “embedded in real-world contexts” (Brown, 2009, p. 53). Although the activities might be contextualized or placed within some context, this does not mean that the activities are meaningful (Shrum & Glisan, 2010). Meaningful communicative activities, such as Task-Based Activities (TBA), are essential to the CA.

Since most foreign language textbooks are non-communicative, many teachers feel that the textbook mitigates the possibility of creating a communicative classroom. The observed instructors use the textbook in different ways in their respective classrooms. When asked about his use of the textbook, Professor Petersson explained that the textbook does not dictate what or how he teaches, while observations of Professor Smith’s class showed a more central role of the textbook in her classroom. Professor Petersson uses the textbook as a resource, as it provides topics to choose from and some activities to use, but he does not feel hindered by the limitations of the textbook. He admits, however, that as a more experienced instructor it is easy for him to gather materials and ideas from other lessons and texts and create his own activities. His teaching experience enables him to avoid reliance on the textbook as a backbone for classroom instruction. During classroom observation the textbook was only referred to a handful of times and no work was done directly from the text, although a few activities were used from the text that were relevant to the topic being discussed.

As was previously mentioned, Professor Smith’s instruction seemed based primarily on the text, despite her claim that she adapts her lesson materials to the needs of her students. The reason for this might be because the material is new to her and she is still discovering the best method of teaching it. In her interview, she explained how this semester she is piloting a new textbook. She acknowledged that the old textbook was outdated, but she felt the content was more applicable to the students. With this new textbook, she is working on adapting it for her students, determining how it is applicable to them, and what adjustments she needs to make. She considers it important for her to take ownership of the textbook, stating that she is willing to omit anything from the text that she does not feel is pertinent and bring in outside materials to supplement the lesson.

As was previously mentioned, the textbook can hinder the application of the CA in the classroom. Both instructors acknowledge the disadvantages of the textbooks. Professor Petersson limits his use of the textbook,
using other materials to supplement his lesson, a practice reflected in the observations. Professor Smith, however, claims to adapt the textbook and bring in supplemental materials; however, this was not apparent during the observations. She frequently referred to the textbook and had the students complete the activities in the textbook.

**Use of the Target Language**

For foreign language instruction to be effective, the target language must be the main mode of communication in the classroom; in fact, 90% of all discourse should be in the target language to allow students to practice listening, speaking, reading and writing (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). In addition, Foster (2009) states, “target language explanations lead to more secure learning than mother tongue explanations” (p. 256). This includes instructions for activities or homework assignments, and even explanations for students who are falling behind. A multitude of techniques exist for assisting their comprehension; for example, provide written as well as oral directions and handouts in the target language that they can refer to for more information. Model how the activity is to be accomplished and be willing to explain one-on-one, still in the target language, if a few students are struggling. Most importantly, it is essential to ensure the language spoken is intelligible for their level of comprehension. They will never understand unless the input available is given in a way that is easy to understand. Use gestures, pictures and realia to assist in communicating the message (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro & Mandell, 2001). It is unlikely that the students will be given other opportunities to practice the target language outside of the classroom; therefore, the only exposure they have to the language will be provided by the teacher. It is essential for the instructor to support language learning through the use of the target language.

Despite its importance, teachers struggle to use the target language in the classroom. Carless (2008) reported, “use of L1 was identified by informants as a key challenge in the school task-based language classroom” (p. 332). Students have a tendency to speak their native language in the foreign language classroom regardless of the necessity of speaking the target language. The instructors themselves may become discouraged from using the target language for a variety of factors, including lack of time, fatigue, and inability to manage the classroom (Bateman, 2008).

Although there are many factors that discourage the use of the target language in the classroom, the observed professors excelled at speaking the foreign language and were diligent in encouraging their students to do the same. Professor Petersson excelled at using Spanish to explain grammar, to give instructions for activities, and to answer questions. In turn, the stu-
dents were diligent in their use of the target language as they participated in activities and even during social interactions. It was obviously a breach of protocol to speak in the native language (L1), as an uncomfortable sensation pervaded the classroom when it occurred. While reflecting on the use of the L1, Professor Petersson stated that grammar explanations need to be in the native language to avoid the risk of the students failing to understand; however, the text provides this explanation and should be part of the students’ preparation before attending class. He relates, “When they come to class, they come to hear the language and use the language and see the language modeled. [The language is] the skill you want the students to develop.” Any grammar explanation outside of class is performed in the L1, but in the classroom the L2 must dominate in order for students to acquire the language.

The students’ use of the target language demonstrated that they appreciated and respected Professor Petersson. The comfortable atmosphere in the classroom caused the affective filter to lower, and therefore facilitated the use of the second language. The affective filter is part of a hypothesis first suggested by Krashen (1982). It states that students who feel secure and less anxious will be more likely to speak up and unafraid of making mistakes. This willingness to step out of their comfort zone is essential for them to produce output, or actual spoken language. Krashen explained that, “the effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation” (1982, p. 32). Professor Petersson exhibited the characteristics of a good language teacher in this regard.

Professor Smith’s classes had a similarly relaxed environment, in which the target language was used on a regular basis. She encouraged the students to speak only in English, which she did through several methods; for example, if she heard any language in class other than English she reminded all the students to speak only in English. She said if she does not understand it then they should not use it. Also, when dividing into groups she made it a point to require that they should pair up with someone who did not speak their native language.

The key to learning a foreign language is the development of linguistic skills. Students will be incapable of developing these skills if they are not exposed to the target language (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro & Mandell, 2001). It is the instructor’s prerogative to provide students with a model of the language they are learning through consistent use of language in the classroom. Both Professors Smith and Petersson excelled at this, demonstrating their dedication to helping their students acquire the second language.
Activity Design

Activities should stimulate students to apply newly acquired linguistic knowledge to real communication (Sung, 2010). TBA are learner-centered activities that cause students to communicate with each other to reach a common goal. These activities focus on the meaningful exchange of information and they provide predetermined steps that lead students through tasks that culminate in an ultimate language goal (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001). The tasks cause students to interact with one another through different forms, such as having them interview one another to complete a survey, or an information gap activity in which each party has a separate piece of information that the other needs in order to be able to complete the activity. Another advantage to a task-based approach is that it represents an opportunity for students to re-activate previously taught language forms and structures, thus refining their language output (Carless, 2008). Since successful completion of the task is dependent upon student-to-student interaction, these activities help the students to negotiate meaning and scaffold their learning (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro & Mandell). Despite the effectiveness of these activities, the instructors observed for the study did not follow the unique pattern of TBA. The activities provided, although some may have been communicative in nature, did not lead to a culminating linguistic goal.

Based on observations of Professor Petersson’s class, it appeared as if the interactions between the students were mechanical drills instead of meaningful activities. The students were asked to conjugate sentences in rotating pairs, which felt very monotonous. Although the students were dialoguing, the dialogue was provided by the teacher. In addition, the sentences were not meaningful for the students and did not promote creativity or enforce the negotiation of meaning. Shrum and Glisan (2010) explain that putting mechanical drills into context may trick both students and teachers into believing there is meaningful discourse. However, if both students know what the other is going to say, then there is little to no interpersonal communication occurring, as there is “no real information gap that serves as the catalyst for negotiation of meaning” (Shrum & Glisan, 2010). Professor Petersson failed to recognize the difference between interpersonal communication and mechanical activities that were unsuccessful in fostering negotiation of meaning.

Professor Smith seemed to fare better. Her activities promoted more creative dialogue between the students. As an example, she presented a lesson focused on learning the names of animals. She divided them into groups and each group was instructed to go through the vocabulary list
and try to describe the animals to each other. The methods they used to
describe the animals were at times amusing, but they were able to commu-
nicate, whether through actions, drawing pictures, or verbal description. Another example included the organization of a mock town hall meeting. The issue being discussed was what should be done about the wolves in Yellow-
stone National Park. Students were required to take positions (they had three options) and defend those positions. Although these activities did pro-
vide for the negotiation of meaning, they were not true task-based activities in that they were not part of a larger activity with an ultimate end goal.

TBA are effective in the foreign language classroom because they support the meaningful exchange of information between students. When students are communicating in the target language, they are learning how to successfully manipulate in a new tongue (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro & Mandell, 2001). This is the main goal of language instruction. The observed classrooms were unfortunately lacking in this technique. By designing a lesson plan based on a final goal, instructors will be much more effective in teaching their students how to speak a foreign language.

CONCLUSION

When discussing foreign languages, it is important to consider the role of foreign language in the global context. McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008) define globalization as “a reformulation of social space in which the global and local are constantly interacting with one another” (p. 2). Society has become progressively more global and interconnected (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng). Within the past 10 years, local communities have been increasingly affected by global contexts. In the year 2000, 5.9 % of the world’s population had access to the internet. By 2010, users of the internet increased to almost 30% (Retrieved from http://www.allaboutmarke-
tresearch.com/internet.htm.) Also, the United States has seen an increase in the Hispanic and Asian population over the last ten years. According to the Census Bureau, between 2000-2010 the Hispanic population has increased from 35.3 million to 50.5 million while the Asian population has increased from 10.2 million to 14.7 million (Retrieved from http://2010.census.gov/news/releases/operations/cb11-cn125.html). Even within the United States, students have opportunities to use the foreign language outside of the classroom.

Despite the increased need to learn to communicate in a foreign lan-
guage and, while research supports the CA, it has yet to be fully imple-
mented into foreign language classrooms. Through these observations and interviews the authors came to understand some of the difficulties instruc-
tors face in incorporating the CA into the classroom as well as some of the disparities between what instructors say they do and actual practice. These disparities are possibly due to certain factors such as difficulties with the textbook or not understanding the characteristics of communicative activities. Further research is needed to investigate the role of the CA in the classroom, especially the disconnect between instructors’ understanding of the CA and the actual application of the CA in the classroom.

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The Communicative Classroom

Insights on Perceptions and Practice

Dora Y. Brunson and Gregory S. Child

ABSTRACT

The ideal method for foreign language (FL) instruction should be selected by instructors according to their beliefs and understanding of language acquisition. Through a series of in-class observations and in-person interviews, the authors of this paper compared the beliefs of two foreign language instructors and their perceptions of classroom practice to observed classroom practices. The items addressed and observed—target language use, student-centered activities, and task-based activities—align with the description of a communicative approach. The results suggest that this method has not been effectively employed due to instructors’ perceptions regarding their classroom practices; they believe that they are appropriately applying the communicative techniques, when indeed, according to established principles, they are not. The observations allowed the authors to take a closer look at the communicative method in a classroom setting by studying the use of the TL as well as the use and variety of activities. Therefore, this paper compares current foreign language instructors’ misconceptions of the communicative method to the realities of employing this method.

Keywords: target language, task-based activities, student-centered activities, communicative approach
INTRODUCTION

Perception of classroom practice and the actuality of classroom practice do not always match. In this paper, the perceptions held by foreign language teachers about how they enact a communicative approach (CA) will be compared to observations of their classroom practices. The instructors in this study placed a strong value on CA; however, what they defined as CA and how they applied their understanding in the classroom did not always match. In the following study, we examined how foreign language teachers’ beliefs and perceptions matched the reality of their observed classrooms. Due to the complexity of CA, we focused on just three characteristics: 1) target language use, 2) student-centered activities, and 3) task-based instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Target Language

Target language (TL) use by instructors and students alike is crucial for acquiring foreign languages (ACTFL, 2010; Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001; Bateman, 2008; Brown, 2009; Lee & VanPatten, 2003). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has produced a set of guidelines recommending that language teachers use the TL 90% or more of the time in their classrooms (ACTFL, 2010). Several benefits of high levels of TL use have been identified. Most importantly, when teachers use the TL it creates an atmosphere in which the students must adhere to the TL and negotiate meaning (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro & Mandell, 2001; Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Only when students are required to practice communicating in the TL will they acquire the TL (Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

Negotiation of meaning, an essential aspect of TL use, refers to processes followed by learners to establish comprehension within the TL (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Teachers must provide students with adequate input, that is, they must provide students with clues and assistance as they derive meaning from the language. Hatch (1983, as cited by Lee & VanPatten, 2003) asserts that good input consists of input that is meaning-bearing and comprehensible. Meaning-bearing input is input that carries a message of value to the learner (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Input is made comprehensible through the use of a slower rate of speech, high-frequency vocabulary, simple syntax, repetition, and longer pauses (Hatch, 1983, as cited by Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Comprehensible input provides vast resources, which in turn assist students in the acquisition of a language.
Task-Based Activities

Activity design is also a factor that can facilitate or hinder language acquisition (Anthony Brown, 2009; Willis & Willis, 2007). When students participate in well-structured activities, students improve their language skills, allowing them to accomplish more in the TL. Effective activities, such as task-based activities (TBA), provide appropriate structure to expand students’ skills. TBA are activities composed of multiple tasks or “[activities] in which meaning is primary, there is a problem to solve, there is a relationship to the real-world, and . . . there is an objective that can be assessed in terms of an outcome” (Skehan, 1998, as cited by Huang, 2010, p. 32). Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro and Mandell (2001) provide a description of effective tasks. One major characteristic is that teachers must guide participants through a series of predetermined steps which lead to a communicative goal; tasks should be organized in steps leading to completion of the task. Task design is key. The purpose of each activity needs to be made clear to students, as does a specific time limit to accomplish each step of the task (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001).

Effectively designed TBA allow students to accomplish tasks with minimal dependence on the instructor. “Task-based instruction is learner-centered in that successful completion of a task is only possible as a result of student-to-student interaction” (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001, p. 76). TBA force students to use the TL to communicate. Students are able to expand their language skills by participating in all the steps, which the teacher has designed as a series of manageable activities leading to performance of the overall communicative goal. The goal of communicative language teaching is, “to teach students to express themselves, understand others, and to request clarification or express lack of comprehension to others all in [the TL]” (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001, p. 62). Teachers using TBA provide opportunities for students to interact in the TL in real-world situations, which achieves the goal of communicative teaching.

Student-Centered Activities

To facilitate language acquisition, it is important that teachers focus on topics that interest students. This is part of a student-centered classroom (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). In contrast, a teacher-centered approach views students as “receptive vessels” (Lee & VanPatten, 2001, p. 6), their role, “is to watch, listen, write down, and understand” (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001, p. 7). In this type of classroom, the burden of learning is placed on the teacher and how well the teacher can explain the information (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001).
In student-centered classrooms, the responsibility for learning belongs to the students. “Students [should] use all of the resources at their disposal, both internal and external, to create and express meaning” (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001, p. 8). This relates to instructors’ responsibilities identified by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers: facilitating and planning student learning. It is the teacher who designs the course but the students who complete it (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001; Lee & VanPatten, 2003; Littlewood, 1996; Sung, 2010). Sung (2010) states that implementing student-centered activities promotes engagement and produces positive reactions from students. Students also believe that activities focused on them are fun. Student-centered activities provide opportunities for students to express their individual personalities, promoting real-world communication. Therefore, utilizing student-centered activities promotes TL use and acquisition (Sung, 2010).

METHOD

As indicated above, there are numerous benefits to following a CA approach. The purpose of this study is to examine how teachers’ perceptions of foreign language teaching match their in-class practices. The research questions addressed are:

- What do teachers believe about TL use and how do they apply their beliefs in the classrooms?
- What do teachers believe about TBA, and how do they apply their beliefs about activity design in classroom activities?
- What do teachers believe about student-centered activities and how do they apply their beliefs in their classrooms?

This study was conducted at a large university in the United States. The data were collected from six in-class observations and a series of four in-person, semi-structured interviews. Participants were two female foreign language instructors, one who taught Chinese and the other who taught Spanish. The Chinese observations were conducted in two different classes—first and third-year—and were taught by the same instructor. The Spanish class was a first-year class.

Following the observations, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the instructors, which were recorded and transcribed for analysis. According to Bartels (2005) observations are effective in determining how teachers apply their knowledge about teaching in their classrooms.
Bartels emphasizes the importance of interviews, which allow teachers to explain why they do what they do, providing the interviewer with explicit information about beliefs and attitudes towards specific concepts; making observations and interview well suited for this study.

After the interviews, the instructors’ responses were compared with observed practices. Both instructors articulated well their beliefs about TL use, TBA, and student-centered activities. However, one of the instructors supplied definitions that did not match how the concepts were applied in her classroom.

RESULTS

Target Language

Both instructors were asked how they used the TL in the classroom. The Chinese instructor explained that it is very important that the TL be used in the classroom. Using the TL “[helps] students achieve their communicative [competencies], the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking).” She continued, “depending on [students’] current levels, my goal is to help students to reach i+1, to help students achieve the next level of language learning.” From the observations, it was determined that the TL was used (teacher-student & student-student) in the Chinese classrooms 60% to 70% of the time in the first-year class. In the level three class, the TL was used 95% of the time, which exceeds the 90% recommendation from ACTFL (2010). The use of the TL in the Chinese classes accurately reflected her beliefs.

When asked about TL use the Spanish instructor responded that using the TL is requisite if one is to acquire a second language. The Spanish instructor emphasized the importance of the TL several times during the interview; however, the observations of the Spanish classroom demonstrated that what happened in the Spanish classroom did not match the instructor’s professed beliefs. The Spanish instructor used the TL 85% to 90% of the time with the students. However, when interacting with each other the students did not use the TL with the same frequency. From the observations, it was estimated that student-to-student interactions occurred 15% to 20% of the time in the TL. The Spanish instructor believed that the TL was being used frequently by all students, however, while the instructor used the TL with high frequency, the students did not.

Both instructors valued using the TL with high frequency in the classroom, and both instructors used the TL in the classroom with high frequency. The difference was that the Chinese instructor used language that students could negotiate and provided opportunities for students to interact in the TL with each other. The Spanish instructor, on the other hand, pro-
vided some scaffolding, but only when she noticed that the students were unable to understand her. Students in the Spanish classroom were not surrounded by comprehensible input, which, if properly used, would allow students to acquire the language more effectively (ACTFL, 2010; Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001; Bateman, 2008; Brown, 2009; Lee & VanPatten, 2003).

**Task Based Activities**

Both instructors were asked about activity design, specifically TBA. The Spanish instructor was able to describe what makes a TBA and provided extensive examples of how teachers could structure TBA. During the observations, the Spanish instructor used TBA. The activity featured pictures on a worksheet. Students used demonstrative adjectives to label vocabulary terms and identify their location on the worksheet. The instructor made the activity successful in regard to the day’s objectives, but the students appeared to struggle between steps. While the instructor believed this activity to be task-based, according to her own description of TBA, the activity could not be classified as such because the worksheet was something no one would ever do outside a language classroom. It is not a “real world” activity.

When asked about TBA, the Chinese instructor stated that these activities are a key element of communicative language teaching. Her goals regarding TBA echoed those we find in an article by Sung (2010) entitled *Promoting Communicative Language Learning through Communicative Task*, that “the communicative task include[s] developing human relations through the exchange of information, thoughts and feelings, and completing an action” (p. 705). In the Chinese classrooms, TBA were frequently used. The instructor gave the students in the third-year class an article to read. The students then formed groups and began to read aloud in the TL. In the same groups, students discussed the content and how it related to their everyday lives; their goal was to discuss their views on vegetarianism. They expressed opinions and had the opportunity to defend their individual beliefs based on content from the article and personal opinions. The Chinese instructor’s description and utilization of TBA was consistent with her stated beliefs.

**Student Centered Classroom**

When asked about their role in the classroom, both instructors stated that teachers need to be facilitators of learning, architects who design activities with students doing the work, which follows closely what SLA researchers have said (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001; Lee & VanPatten, 2003; Littlewood, 1996; Sung, 2010). However, the application of this idea was different for both teachers. The Chinese instructor achieved a student-
centered classroom, but the Spanish instructor, believing her focus was on the students, appeared to have done most of the work.

When the TL was used, as mentioned above, it was observed that the Chinese instructor focused language use and classroom activities on students’ everyday lives. Students were not given many constraints on their choice of topics; activity guidelines were made clear and students were allowed to create meaning according to their own interests. The Spanish class on the other hand had many constraints; the Spanish instructor gave the students specific objectives that were to be met through each activity. The conversations and the interactions did not allow students to create their own meaningful output or develop their own ideas. The Spanish instructor was specifically asked about the activities used. She said that the course was designed by a different person, and, when that person designed the course, the only directive had been to follow the textbook. In order for the instructor to meet pre-assigned benchmarks, activities that did not match her teaching philosophy were used.

In both classes, the cumulative goals of each activity were not made explicit, yet in conversing with the instructors it became clear that they had goals for each activity. The Chinese instructor mentioned to the students how the activities they were doing were applicable to real-world situations, but did not convey a specific goal for the activities in the classroom. The Spanish instructor knew what she wanted the students to accomplish, but failed to express any real-world application of the materials covered in class. The goals of the Spanish instructor were however expressed in her interview, along with ways in which the students would be able to use what they had practiced in real-world situations. The instructor had goals, but those goals were not made known to the students.

DISCUSSION

It has been shown that although teachers believe they are using communicative practices, their teaching practices may not match their beliefs. Teachers need to evaluate their practices to determine if the activities and practices used are meaningful to students, and that the teachers’ beliefs are accurately put into practice. The ultimate goal is that teachers apply theory in practice as they foster in students the ability to speak the language with confidence (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001).

The observed instructors both used the TL in their classrooms; however, the Chinese instructor used the TL in more effective ways. The Chinese instructor used the TL in a manner that required her students to listen in order to obtain a message. The Chinese instructor also constructed activ-
ities that fostered student-to-student communication. This student-to-student communication facilitated student use of the TL, which is an important factor in SLA (Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

While the Spanish instructor also used the target language, she used it at a level that was beyond her students. Using advanced-level TL provided too much linguistic complexity for her students (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001). Students could not focus solely on the meaning of the message, but instead were required to focus on all of the linguistic aspects. This counters what the Spanish instructor said when speaking about grammar. The instructor said she wanted the students to be able to focus on the meaning of the language and not have the grammar, “looking over them the whole time.” In the Chinese classroom, the TL was used according to the beliefs of the Chinese teacher. In the Spanish classroom, the teacher thought the language was being used appropriately, but in reality the language was not used with the frequency or quality the Spanish teacher believed necessary for language acquisition.

When comparing the activities used by the instructors, it was observed that both used TBA. Nevertheless, neither instructor established connections with the classroom goals and real-world applications of what they were practicing. The Chinese instructor told the students how they could apply the current activity in the real world but failed to express the goal for her activities. The Spanish instructor did not establish any goals, nor did she mention any applicable situations where students would be able to use what they were practicing. SLA researchers have stated the importance of making goals known to students, as goals provide benchmarks against which students can assess their own progress (Willis & Willis, 2007).

The observations revealed a large disparity between the two classrooms with regard to student-centered activities. The Chinese instructor allowed students to choose the topics they wanted to discuss. On the other hand, the Spanish instructor, who mentioned the desire to have students practice language use without being concerned with the grammar, used activities that focused on grammar principles. The Spanish instructor stated that according to her superiors she was required to meet certain benchmarks regarding grammar. While the impact that the predetermined benchmarks had on the activities was not clear, it was clear that the activities focused on grammar more than on meaning.

CONCLUSION

Perceptions and practice do not always appear to match. Both of the instructors in this study clearly articulated their beliefs about TL use, TBA,
and student-centered activities. However, their classroom actions did not always match their stated beliefs. It is difficult to arrive at any definitive conclusions from this study due to the small sample size; nevertheless, the findings here merit further study. As researchers and language teachers continue to develop effective language teaching methodologies, it is essential for in-service teachers to be able to articulate their own beliefs and recognize how those beliefs are put into action. Only then will teachers be able to make informed decisions about their curriculum design, apply theory to practice, improve instruction, assist students in the language process so that students may become communicators capable of real world interactions.

REFERENCES


Yasmine Kataw gives us a view into how concept-based instruction (CBI) can be used to aid students in the internalization of culturally based constructs tied to the language they are learning. She illustrates using the Arabic cultural construct of khajal, which overlaps the English constructs of shame, embarrassment, and shyness. Presented at the 2014 symposium.

The Cultural Concept of Khajal and Concept-Based Instruction

Yasmine Kataw

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the teaching of the Arabic concept of khajal, which is an abstract concept that covers in its range the English concepts of shame, embarrassment, shyness, bashfulness and other shame variants. The pragmatics of the situation and context in which the word is used in Arabic largely determine which of the variants is appropriate. Khajal is an emotional concept that is difficult to define in terms of context alone, as there are culture-specific codes such as gestures and intonation which govern the use of this word in Arab culture. Therefore, this paper addresses the principles through which concept-based instruction (CBI) can turn L2 development into a conceptual process through internalization that helps learners understand the pragmatically appropriate use of concepts such as khajal. A learner who receives this type of instruction gains a systematic understanding of this abstract emotional concept through a materialized concrete activity resulting in its internalization.

Keywords: concept-based instruction, shame variants, culture-based concept, pragmatics, materialization, verbalization, internalization, role-play, Arab culture, context

INTRODUCTION

The pragmatic parameters of any language must be taken into account in cross-cultural communication (LoCastro, 2012). The study of pragmatics covers the ways in which context contributes to meaning, and according
to Leech (1983), “meaning in pragmatics is defined relative to a speaker or user of the language” (p. 6). Context may not always be enough to indicate meaning, especially when culture-specific codes such as gestures and intonation govern the use of language. Moreover, Shammas (2001) explains that, since cohesion and coherence of text are not sufficient guides for textual interpretation, we must look outside of the text for an adequate account of appropriateness and inappropriateness. Therefore, in terms of communication in Arab cultures, pragmatics and culture-specific codes are analyzed for the purpose of interpretation. Ryding (2013) points out the need for teachers of Arabic to create multiple paths to intercultural competence. One such path is concept-based instruction, which helps equip the learner with strategies for interpreting the pragmatic effect of the Arabic utterances as they are used by native speakers. These strategies consist of role-play and the materialization and verbalization of the cultural concept of khajal through drawing the expressions of khajal from clips of various scenarios.

CONCEPTS

Wells (2008) has defined concepts as “collaboratively produced constructs that constitute the realm of “what is known” (p. 330). In Arabic, khajal is a cultural concept that has been formed over the centuries in Arab cultures. It relates to what causes or triggers the emotion of shame and the response to it. While shame in general is a universal concept, the Middle Eastern cultural concept of khajal differs from the specific concepts of shame, embarrassment, shyness, and bashfulness in Western cultures. Teachers of Arabic can begin introducing the cultural concept based on universality and then compare cultural values behind sub-concepts of shame. This will help learners understand why khajal does not have an English equivalent, and thus prepares them to understand the various contexts in which this concept is used. Focusing on systematic relationships between word meanings and their cultural contexts brings learners to an awareness of pragmatics, semantics, and the concept of culture that will develop both their understanding of the word’s meaning and their ability to use that particular word appropriately in cultural contexts. In fact, Vygotsky asserts, “The development of concepts and the development of word meanings are one and the same process” (1987, p. 2).

THE CONCEPT OF KHAJAL IN ARAB CULTURE

Culture-based concepts that can have different definitions based on cultural values make it difficult to grasp for L2 learners. In this section, I will explain why the cultural concept of khajal is one of those difficult concepts.
According to Al Jallad (2008, 2007), from whom Table 1 is adapted, the concept of khajal in Arabic can be defined as one of the following depending on context, gesture, and intonation.

*Shame*  
X was ashamed of him or herself, something was happening inside X, the kind of bad thing that happens to people when they know they have done something bad, and they do not want other people to know it.

*Embarrassment*  
X was embarrassed, something was happening inside X, the kind of bad thing that happens to people when they know people are thinking of them, and they do not want this to go on after now.

*Shyness*  
X was shy, something was happening inside X, the kind of bad thing that happens to people when they see that people whom they do not know well are thinking of them, and they do not want this to go on after now.

Table 1. English Definitions of *khajal* (adapted from Al Jallad 2008, 2007).

The following examples show how *khajal* can have more than one similar meaning that could either have a positive or negative connotation, which cannot be understood from the sentence context alone.

1. *Samir khajil min Muna*. Samir shame from Muna.

Here *khajal* could have two meanings:

- Samir felt ashamed/embarrassed in the presence of Muna. In this case, Samir could have done something wrong in Muna’s presence that caused him to feel ashamed of his bad behavior. *(negative connotation)*
- Samir felt shy and bashful in the presence of Muna. Samir perhaps likes Muna and felt shy in her presence. *(positive connotation)*


Here *khajal* could also have two meanings:

- Ali did something silly in public and embarrassed Waleed. *(mildly negative)*
- Ali did or said something sacrilegious that caused Waleed to feel ashamed for being his friend. *(extremely negative)*
When students analyze these scenarios, they must understand the full context of the story or dialogue, including how the emotion was triggered and the response to it, as well as the relationship between speaker and hearer. The pragmatics of the situation and the context in which the word is used largely determine which of the variants is appropriate (Al Jallad, 2008). When students understand the cultural values behind these scenarios, it makes it easier for them to make distinctions between the uses of khajal.

Moreover, Arabic shame scenarios are different in many aspects from those in English-speaking cultures, especially in what triggers the emotion. For example, for a host to serve guests coffee with the left hand is shameful, which is almost hard to believe for an English-speaker. Culturally, khajal is sex and age-related. Women and children are expected to feel it more often than men do. For example, from my university experience in Jordan, women were meant to feel khajal if they smoked in public on campus, while no such cultural constraint was applied to men who smoked in public.

Certain shame constructions in Arabic do not have equivalents in English. Specifically, in English there is no kind of shame that is praised or recommended as in Arabic. Harkins (1990) stresses the distinction between embarrassment and shame in English: One can be embarrassed and pleased at the same time by praise, but never ashamed and pleased. This is what makes this emotional concept difficult for non-native speakers of Arabic to understand. In North American culture, in general one should not be shy or quiet, as it may indicate a meek or even weak personality (Al Jallad, 2008). Being shy and quiet in Arab culture, however, can signify respect, which is praised. When teachers take the time to explain the differences between Arab and North American culture, this will help students understand the conceptualization of shame. For example, values such as freedom and standing up for one’s rights are highly valued in North America, whereas, religion, knowing one’s heritage, and respecting the elderly are core values for an Arab speaker. This may clarify the concept of “good shame” which is shame that has a positive connotation (Al Jallad).

**ROLE-PLAY**

When students engage in specifically designed role-plays, they have an opportunity to practice expressing their growing understanding of the cultural concept of khajal. According to Via (1976), role-play helps students understand and act like native speakers while practicing embodied social norms including gestures and intonation. Role-play allows students to use the concept in order to explain a real-life event or state of affairs in collaboration with other students. Popper and Eccles (1977) explain, “We can
grasp a theory only by trying to reinvent it or reconstruct it with the help of our imagination” (p. 461). Showing clips of real scenarios in which khajal is being used between native speakers will help learners comprehend the cultural context of its appropriate use and the positive or negative connotation of this word in different situations between different people in the society. Only then can students use their imagination to create their own similar situations and try using khajal appropriately. The following examples are scenarios that students can act out in order to increase their understanding of this cultural concept khajal.

- When elders walk into a room, out of respect the younger people stand. Young people who do not stand to show respect should feel **khajal. (shame; negative connotation)**

- When guests are about to leave the hosts’ house, the hosts are expected to invite them to stay longer a number of times. Guests are to express **khajal** about staying longer and should persist in leaving politely. **(embarrassed; positive connotation)**

- When men greet women, out of respect they lower their gaze to convey **khajal** on their part. **(bashfulness or shyness: positive connotation)**

**CONCEPT-BASED INSTRUCTION (CBI)**

The L2 classroom is a place where students interact using the L2 to communicate and to mediate understanding of the L2 culture and the cultural concepts that are new to students. Therefore, according to Negueruela, (2003) “pedagogical principles in CBI applied to the field of L2 learning are grounded on a sociocultural understanding of human thinking and learning” (p. 364). Ultimately, in order to use such concepts appropriately, one must practice with others. However, before practicing these concepts, students can be introduced to them through systematic instruction. Students are then able to comprehend and make use of the concept and transfer their abstract understanding to a concrete understanding of the concept. Vygotsky (1987) views mastering a concept as leading the learner to a deeper understanding and control of the concept. Learners try taking in all the concept’s characteristics and forming their own understanding to grasp how to use it correctly in various contexts and situations.

In general, teachers tend to rely on grammatical rules of thumb for teaching difficult concepts assuming this is the quickest way to learn them. However, simple rules of thumb do not help the learner outside the class-
room. As an alternative, I posit that CBI, which aims for internalization of meaning for long-term learning and understanding, is not only more effective but also more rewarding for learners as it helps them retain the concept so they can actually use it appropriately outside the classroom. When the teacher is able to implement an activity that will allow the learners to internalize the concept, there will be no need for memorization of rules.

DEFINITION OF VERBALIZATION, MATERIALIZATION, AND INTERNALIZATION

Gal’perin (1967) defines internalization as a “multiple phase procedure” which begins with the presentation of the concept and ends with its automatization. This procedure cannot occur without two additional procedures, which are materialization and verbalization. Therefore, internalization is a four-phase procedure: 1. Presentation 2. Materialization 3. Verbalization 4. Automatization.

Materialization is transforming the verbal representation of the concept into an imagistic depiction that is more concrete, coherent, and easily comprehended, rather than a verbal definition or rule of thumb. The purpose behind materializing concepts that are difficult for L2 learners to master is to compensate for the poor visual learning that most textbooks provide. These L2 textbooks are full of illustrations that support the functions of rules of thumb like tables or images that the textbook authors found to be relevant to the function of the rule, but may not be relevant to the learner’s perception of the concept.
Lantolf and Poehner (2008) add, “The importance of rendering the abstract in a material or materialized form is that it helps learners to identify essential characteristics of concepts” (p. 324). Therefore, concrete external materializations help learners understand what makes the concept function and how to define and use it in terms of context. See figure 2.

![Figure 2. Materialization (adapted from Lantolf and Poehner, 2008).](image)

Verbalization is the expression of one’s understanding of the concept and the understanding of how to use the concept appropriately. Verbalization of a concept is not reciting a memorized definition of a concept; it is an expression of the learner’s comprehension of the concept in two stages. The first stage is to explain the concept to one’s self through what Vygotsky (1978) called “inner speech”. The second stage is to express comprehension of the materialized concept to one’s fellow learners in the classroom. The materialization of the concept may only make meaningful sense to the learner who materialized it. That being said, it is important for students to make these personal meanings comprehensible to others.

![Figure 3. Verbalization (adapted from Lantolf and Poehner, 2008).](image)
These further elaborations enhance the students’ understanding of the concept. See figure 3. For example, after students are shown clips of *khajal* scenarios in Arab cultural settings, they will draw representations of their own understanding of *khajal* from each scenario. Following their drawing, they will then verbalize their reasons behind drawing *khajal* and express the meaning and its positive or negative connotation behind each drawing to themselves in the form of inner speech. Then students will explain their drawings to others. This process will continue until the students can use this cultural concept of *khajal* in oral speech appropriately without referring back to their external materializations of this concept. At this point, students “begin to rely on its internal ideal image”, according to Lantolf (2008, p. 31). In other words, learners begin to understand the meaning and appropriate usage of the concept without repeatedly going through the same systematic process of internalization. The learner has acquired this concept, and the image once created to understand the concept now remains with the student.

The following *khajal* scenarios and drawings, pictured in figure 4, are hypothetical examples of materializing *khajal* through CBI.

*Negative connotation*

Samir felt ashamed in the presence of Muna.

(Samir perhaps did something wrong in Muna’s presence that caused him to feel ashamed of his bad behavior.)

*Positive connotation*

Samir felt shy and bashful in the presence of Muna.

(Samir perhaps likes Muna and felt shy in her presence.)

Figure 4. Materialization. *Samir khajil min Muna*. Two possible interpretations.

**CONCLUSION**

In regard to teaching Arabic to non-native speakers, Ryding (2013) states that “in some cases there are no exact one-word equivalents for certain
concepts, and... on the other hand, there may be many ways to interpret a particular term” (p. 7). This statement is not only true for English-speaking learners of Arabic, but also for learners of other languages that contain cultural concepts difficult to explain without demonstrating real contextual scenarios unique to that language’s culture. When faced with cultural concepts such as khajal, second or foreign language teachers of Arabic can implement CBI. Not only will CBI enable them to remain in the target language as much as possible, but, more importantly, they will find that students retain a long-term understanding of the concept because the process of internalization is done in the target language. When the objective is to understand and be able to use the concept in pragmatically appropriate contexts, CBI is an effective way to approach teaching culture-based concepts in the language classroom.

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Negueruela, E. (2003). A sociocultural approach to the teaching-learning of second languages: Systematic-theoretical instruction and L2 develop-
The Cultural Concept of Khajal and Concept-Based Instruction


Mohammed Hussein identifies the integral role of diglossia in the Arabic world. He highlights how this diglossia, in practice, is not a matter of two rigidly separated code domains, but a continuum of code-switching. He then proposes a model of teaching to prepare students to internalize the subtleties of operating along this continuum. Presented at the 2014 symposium.

Bringing Code-Switching to the Arabic Language Classroom

A Concept-Based Approach

Mohammed Hussein

ABSTRACT

The classical view of research in diglossia tends to cast Standard Arabic (SA) as a formal and/or written variety, while Dialectical Arabic (DA) is usually seen as a colloquial, informal, and spoken variety. This view assumes the existence of two separate codes and does not account for the occurrence of switching between codes within the same discourse. However, it has been shown through research that both codes are used by native speakers in formal and informal situations, as well as in written and spoken discourse. The occurrence of code-switching (CS) in different types of spoken and written discourse in Arabic constitutes a challenge for learners and educators of Arabic as a foreign language. CS is used by native speakers of Arabic as a conceptually-framed linguistic device. Native speakers switch codes to convey specific concepts including importance, sophistication, seriousness, prestige, accessibility, and identity (Albirini, 2011). However, only limited research has been carried out on the pedagogical implication of CS in the classroom. In this paper, I illustrate the use of concept-based instruction in order to teach CS to advanced Arabic students. I draw upon the corpus-informed data of Albirini (2011) on the social motivations behind CS and use the model of
Thorne, Reinhardt, and Golombek (2008) to teach these concepts in the classroom. The model includes a three-stage process: orienting basis, conceptual materialization, and individual and group verbalization activities. Sample activities are described in detail.

Keywords: diglossia, code-choice, code-switching, code-mixing, Modern Standard Arabic, Dialectical Arabic, Colloquial Arabic, concept-based instruction

INTRODUCTION: DIGLOSSIA AND CODE-SWITCHING

Arabic is classified as one of the most difficult-to-learn languages. This difficulty is attributed to a number of factors including psychological, pedagogical, structural and sociolinguistic factors (Steven, 2007). However, one of the important factors as shown by Stevens is diglossia. Ferguson (1996) defines diglossia as “a relatively stable language situation in which … there is a very divergent, highly codified … superposed variety” (Ferguson, 1959, as cited in Ferguson, 1996, p. 53) that coexists with the primary dialects of the language. In a diglossic community, there is a highly-valued variety (H) and low variety (L). Ideally, within the language community, H is learned in schools and used in formal situations and written forms, while L is used as a natively-acquired variety in everyday conversation. Even though this view is not a precise description of the situation of Arabic, as I will discuss, it is still valid to describe the Arabic language as a diglossic language with two poles or varieties, namely Standard Arabic (SA) as the H variety and vernacular Arabic or Dialectical Arabic (DA) as the L variety. What is important is that, according to Ferguson (1996), in diglossia, language varieties are contextually allocated.

A very classical point of view is to think about diglossia in terms of written form versus spoken form. El Essawi (2006) assumes that “learners of Arabic as a foreign language can only depend on written texts as a source of input needed to develop their writing skills” (p. 179, emphasis added). Another view of diglossia is to think about it in terms of formality versus informality, or classical versus modern. Having this concept in mind, the difference between SA and DA is “somewhat analogous to learning the English of Chaucer (primarily through writing and formal spoken situation) without it ever being reinforced in ordinary everyday speech; while at the same time learning spoken everyday English without it ever being reinforced through writing” (Stevens, 2006, p. 55, emphasis added). In both of these views, SA and DA are viewed dichotomously with firm lines drawn between the two codes.
Both assumptions limit the use of each code to one type of discourse. However, in my opinion, neither of the two views succeeds in grasping the full power of the dyadic relationship between the two codes. It has been shown in research that native speakers use SA in spoken situation such as religious sermons, political speeches, soccer commentary (Albirini, 2011), and talk shows (Bassiouney, 2010). In addition, DA is used in written form in print media (Amin, 2013; Ibrahim, 2010) and in social communication websites (Ramsay, 2013). Furthermore, DA is used in formal speech such as international conferences (Wilmsen, 2006) and religious sermons (Albirini, 2011; Bassiouney, 2011). All of this indicates that it is not a matter of formality and thus, Ferguson’s model of diglossia can be considered only cautiously when applied to the case of Arabic.

When revisiting the concept of diglossia, Ferguson (1996) states that his original intention when he introduced the term diglossia was to describe a clear case, a case that is “clearly identifiable, but not unique, i.e., that had many examples around the world” (p. 50). This does not mean that there are no cases in which there is a variation or a continuum between the H and the L. That is to say, according to Ferguson, there are a number of cases or situations of diglossia, and Arabic is a unique and important one.

Britto (1986, as cited in Ferguson, 1996) states that, in Arabic, H and L are optimally distant but not super-optimally distant as is the case in Spanish and Guarate or sub-optimally as in formal-informal English. Badawi (1973) explains that instead of speaking of two distinctive codes, namely the standard and the dialect, we should define what he calls the linguistic levels. Badawi explains that what distinguishes each level from the other is the proportion of standard features in each level. The levels range within the continuum of two poles: fuS-Ha al-turaath (the classical standards), which refers to the pure use of SA, and ‘aamiyyat al-‘ummiyeen (the colloquial of the illiterate), which refers to the pure use of DA. Even though Badawi does not speak explicitly about CS, he illustrates that mixing codes occurs in different levels at various proportion. For example, when explaining phonological features of the third level, ‘aamiyyat al-muthaqafeen (the colloquial of the cultured people in Egypt) he states that words with the /q/ sound, a distinctive phoneme of Standard Arabic, are pronounced half of the time in the Cairene glottal stop alternate /ʔ/ (Badawi, 1973). I argue that what really distinguishes the different linguistic levels is the proportion of CS within the same linguistic level. In Badawi’s fuS-Ha al-turaath (classical standards), CS is very limited or does not occur at all, while in the lower levels, CS occurs in various proportions.

From this perspective, the need for teachers and learners of Arabic to study CS becomes clear. Diglossia does not constitute a problem for native
Bringing Code-Switching to the Arabic Language Classroom

speakers, for they—of course—acquire DA as their L1, and learn SA in schools as another variety of their L1. The challenge is for nonnative speakers. In order to acquire native-like competence, learners should not only have good command of the two codes, but they should know when and how they should or may switch the codes within the same type of discourse. For native speakers, it would feel awkward if the Imam were to give his Friday sermon in the vernacular form all the time, or if someone were to use the standard to tell a joke or to hold an everyday conversation.

THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF CS

Much research has been done on the social motivation behind CS (e.g., Albirini, 2011; Bassiouney, 2006, 2009; Scotton, 1995). Bassiouney (2006) explains the role of context and setting regarding code-choice. Blom and Gumperz (1972, as cited in Bassiouney, 2009) distinguish between situational CS and metaphorical CS. Situational CS is motivated by external factors, such as the setting and the topic. On the other hand, metaphorical CS is related to the perception of the speaker in relation to those external factors (Bassiouney, 2009). According to Romaine (1995, cited in Bassiouney, 2006), speakers code-switch (1) to quote someone, (2) to specify the addressee, (3) to reiterate, (4) to qualify a message, (5) to differentiate personal talk from general talk, (6) to use as a filler, (7) to clarify, (8) to change the topic, (9) to signal a type of discourse, and (10) to specify a special arena.

Albirini (2011) has shown through analysis of various texts that speakers switch between SA and DA according to certain patterns. Albirini (2011) indicates that regardless of the discourse, native speakers switch to SA in order indicate a number of meanings such as using formulaic expressions, direct quotation, adding emphasis or assuring identity. In addition, within the use of SA, speakers may switch to DA as a direct quote, to simplify or to exemplify, to indicate not being serious, or to scold.

THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION OF CS

The traditional method of teaching Arabic tends to focus only on SA, for it is the form that keeps the standard linguistic structure of Arabic. The debate about which code should be taught first, and whether they should be taught separately or in parallel is beyond the scope of this study. The focus of this paper is on the matter of teaching advanced learners of Arabic, who already have a good command of the two codes, to switch between codes naturally in a way that will give them native-like competence and augment their communicative repertoire.
To the best of my knowledge, very few studies have focused on the pedagogical implication of CS in the classroom. Many studies of CS focus on the sociolinguistic dimension of CS. In the next part, I suggest concept-based instruction as an approach to teaching CS according to the concepts and social functions of CS illustrated by Albirini (2011).

BUILDING CONCEPT-BASED ACTIVITIES FOR CS: THE APPLICATION OF A SPECIFIC MODEL

Thorne, Reinhardt, and Golombek (2008), drawing selected elements from Gal’perin’s (1992) approach, offer a three-stage model for teaching academic spoken English to international teaching assistants at a North-American university. The first stage begins with orienting the learners to the concepts of genre and language as discourse. The second stage involves the use of high-level conceptual materialization, and the third stage consists of individual and group verbalization. The same approach, I believe, can be followed to teach CS to advanced Arabic learners. Below, I explain how to implement Thorne et al.’s (2008) model in teaching the concepts behind CS that Albirini (2011) identified.

Albirini offers an analytical model of the pattern of CS between SA and DA. The orienting phase that I propose for teaching CS includes introducing learners to the concept of diglossia as the coexistence of two codes of the same language. Learners should be aware that the two codes are used in all types of discourse. However, in formal situations, the speaker would tend to speak in SA while moving to DA purposefully to indicate unimportance, low prestige, accessibility, and triviality (Albirini, 2011). On the other hand, in informal situations, speakers tend to speak in DA while moving to SA purposefully to indicate importance, high prestige, seriousness, and sophistication (Albirini, 2011). In the orienting phase, it should be explained to learners that, even though CS is not always systematic, the desired outcome of that intervention is to help them understand and practice systematic sociopragmatic functions of CS, which will augment their communication repertoires. As Gal’perin (1992) stipulates, part of the orienting phase is to explain the process of the intervention or “the means of the action and the necessary steps and conditions of the action” (Arievitch & Haenan, 2005, p. 160).

In Thorne, Reinhardt, and Golombek’s model (2008), the orienting phase begins with an opening activity exposing learners to some authentic natural data of academic spoken discourse, followed by posing questions that aim to heighten learners’ awareness about that genre (Thorne et al, 2008). Similarly, I recommend beginning the orienting phase with exposing
learners to different CS cases and posing questions for discussion that direct their attention to CS. For example, learners will watch some excerpts of CS in natural conversations, then they will discuss the following questions:

- Who are the participants in this conversation?
- What are they talking about?
- What is the code at the beginning of the excerpt? What is the code at the end?
- Why do you think the speaker changes the code? What does this tell you about the speaker’s feelings?

The aim of the questions asked is to raise learner awareness about the setting, the genre, and the use (LoCastro, 2012) as connected to code-choice. It also aims at introducing the concept of metaphorical, systematic, purposeful CS and some of the concepts behind it. Similar procedures should be followed in the orienting phase regarding different concepts of CS as indicated in Albirini (2011). This opening activity is followed by explanation the meaning of CS and diglossia in Arabic. Learners are then asked to identify CS in various excerpts that exhibit different cases of CS. Then, they are asked to reflect upon the purposes of each case. The discussion is followed by explicit instruction on code-choice as illustrated in Figure 1 and code-switching as explained by Albirini (2011).

In the following stage, the learners are asked to identify code-choice and relate it to the social domain in which the speech event occurs. Figure 1 is presented to help them. Even though the focus is on spoken language, the written social domains are presented in order to inform the learner about
the complete picture. This activity should be supported with ample authentic usage samples from the social domain. It should be clear to the learners that this chart helps them decide the general code of speech, and does not represent all cases of CS. This chart will also help learners understand the concept of High variety and Low variety.

This materialization is followed by another materialization in the form of a flow chart to illustrate cases of CS and accompanied with activities in which learners are asked to identify CS cases and their social function. Each activity is followed by discussion to help the learners verbalize their understanding of the concepts related to CS.

In the final phase, learners are asked to perform a production task in which they demonstrate their use of code-choice and CS according to the charts. The production tasks can take the form of role-plays in which learners are asked to exhibit their understanding of CS. For example, “Explain to your friend the importance of Middle Eastern studies at American universities. Introduce basic concepts in SA, and give your friend some examples and simple illustrations in DA.” Similar activities should be offered, and followed by another activity in which learners are asked to highlight the usage of a code in their own words.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

CS in Arabic is a linguistic device that native speakers use to convey certain messages. Learners of Arabic should eventually be able use it in the same way that expert speakers do. Accordingly, I tried in this paper to set the basis of an approach towards teaching CS. However, further classroom activities should be added. For example, I recommend a corpus analysis of different cases of CS in the spoken language. This analysis will help educators design authentic activities following the model offered in this paper.

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Grammar Drills or a Communicative Approach?

Nadiya Gifford

ABSTRACT

This paper compares two approaches in teaching a second language (L2): grammar drills and a communicative approach. These two approaches are described and their influence on L2 learning discussed. The design of communicative activities and the nature of their learning benefits are also analyzed.

Keywords: traditional approach, grammar drill, communicative approach, communicative activities

INTRODUCTION

According to LoCastro (2012), people cannot avoid communication. As languages are meant for communication, learning a second language (L2) must necessarily involve communication, which requires interpersonal interaction and the negotiation of meaning. During the many years I was learning English in Ukraine at school and in the university, only traditional teaching approaches were used in second language teaching. These invariably featured a teacher who did most of the talking, who spent much time explaining English grammar in our native language, and who led us in textbook exercises (Relan & Gillani, 1998).

Even today this traditional approach is the only method of teaching not only in Ukrainian schools but in many other countries around the world. In traditional classrooms students learn by memorization, repetition, and drills. Learners are also not allowed to make errors (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). This approach definitely facilitates study about the language, but students who are taught by traditional methods usually cannot use the language for real-life communication.
As a language learner in the USA, I have been exposed to another way of teaching and learning a foreign or a second language: the communicative approach. According to Ranta (2002), communicative language teaching is “the playing field for all learners” (p. 160). Students learn and practice the L2 by interacting with each other and practicing the language through communicative activities. I believe that the communicative way is much better because it gives students the opportunity to not just study an L2 by memorization and repetition but actually learn it through real-life communication. The communicative approach helps students learn the target language (TL) through engaging and meaningful activities to practice the language. As a result, students learn the L2 grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary, and they also are able to communicate with each other and native speakers (NSs).

SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Lightbown and Spada (2006) present their perspectives on L2 teaching and learning. They claim that, while imitation in learning an L2 is important in early age learning for children, it is not the sole driving force. The authors say: “For one thing, learners produce many novel sentences that they could not have heard before” and “this does not mean, however, that imitation has no role to play in language learning. Some children imitate a great deal as they acquire their first language, but they do not imitate everything they hear” (p. 183). On the other hand, older students need different ways of learning, because with only imitation, repetition, and memorization students do not learn as much. Also, the authors admit that parents usually correct children’s structural errors (grammar, pronunciation) more often at an early age when children are learning many new words, but as children grow a bit older, parents pay more attention to the meaning. Second language learners, especially beginners, are looking for similarities between first and second languages during L2 learning. This contributes to some types of errors that learners make. Lightbown and Spada claim that “when errors are caused by learners’ perception of some partial similarity between the first and second languages, they may be difficult to overcome” (p. 187). This tends to be the case especially with pronunciation but can happen with grammar as well.

If learners learn only grammatical rules and do not practice them through interactions, they will forget what they have learned because practicing language helps to engrave the rules and how and when to use them on the memory: “without opportunities to continue hearing, seeing, and using them [grammatical rules], the language features learned in the first unit
will have been forgotten long before the last” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 189). Therefore, learning an L2 through communicative activities, games, and practice for real-life situations is very important.

**GRAMMAR DRILLS**

Traditional models including grammar drills were and still are used in L2 teaching in many countries. Lee and VanPatten (2003) describe the “Atlas complex,” which refers to the dynamic in which the “authoritative transmitter of knowledge and receptive vessels are the primary roles, respectively, that instructors and students play in many traditional classrooms” (p. 6). The Atlas complex is a teacher-centered method of teaching and has a knowledge-transmitting focus.

As has been stated, in traditional classrooms students learn by memorization, repetition, and drills, and are not allowed to make errors (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). In traditional instruction, teacher talk takes most of the class time and is built around the textbook (Relan & Gillani, 1998). My memories about my school experience were that my classmates and I were allowed only to ask questions and answer those of the teacher, but no communication and discussion was allowed.

Are grammar drills needed in L2 teaching? Surely, some grammar instruction is necessary. For example, without understanding Russian cases and their usage, a student will never be fluent in the language. This is because Russian cases affect a number of parts of speech, such as nouns, pronouns, adjectives, numbers, etc.

If grammar instruction is necessary in the L2 classroom, how should teachers teach it? Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, and Mandell (2001) describe two opposite views on using grammar instruction. On the one extreme, there are those who advocate for no grammar instruction in L2 the classroom. Adherents believe there is no need for grammar instruction in L2 teaching, as students will learn a language just through comprehensible input and conversational activities. However, students are not likely to develop the L2 fully. Returning to the example of the Russian language, students will never be completely fluent without knowledge of the six Russian cases that influence nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and numbers, understanding how gender influences different parts of speech, and how and when to use singular and plural.

On the other extreme is the view that grammar is training, where the goal is “grammar for grammar’s sake”, described by Ballman et al. (2001, p. 33). Teachers who hold this view believe that the key to learn-
ing a language is learning its grammar. Such teachers design their lessons around grammatical rules and exercises. However, as with the “no grammar” approach, students are not likely to develop the L2 fully. The view of “grammar for grammar’s sake” will not help students learn how to use the language for real-life communication.

The key recommendation of Ballman et al. (2001) is to offer “grammar instruction in support of communication” (p. 35). In other words, grammar instruction must be connected to the communicative goal. In this way, students will learn what is necessary (vocabulary and grammar rules) to achieve real-world goals.

**A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH**

If grammar instruction supports communication and has a communicative goal students will be more engaged in learning, because learning is not about memorizing and repeating but about the ability to find, evaluate, and apply information (Lujan & DiCarlo, 2005). I was first exposed to the communicative way of learning as an undergraduate student at USU. I really loved this approach; I was studying through interaction with other students through group and pair work—discussions, presentations, and creating messages in different ways. All these activities were enjoyable to me. Students learn and practice the L2 by interacting with each other and practicing the language through communicative activities. That is why I really like and support teaching by this approach and I have been excited to learn more about communicative teaching in order to apply it consistently in my teaching.

The communicative approach has moved from teacher-centered approaches that emphasize grammar structures and linguistic competence to learner-centered approaches that emphasize learning strategies and communicative competence. Lee and VanPatten (2003) notice that in the communicative classroom the roles of teachers as well as students have been changed. The communicative classroom is student-centered and is focused on communication. In this kind of class, the instructor is no longer the drill leader.

Students in the communicative classroom carry more responsibility. Relan and Gillani (1998) describe communicative classroom practices in which students’ speaking takes priority over teacher’s speaking in the class. Students have more freedom to choose “the content to be organized and learned” (p. 42). Sometimes a teacher allows students to define the rules of behavior. Instructional materials are varied and are used in small groups.
The teacher provides students with opportunities for communication and creation of real-life messages. The student’s role is not to repeat what the teacher says but rather to practice the target language through creation of utterances and messages in the language (Lee & VanPatten, 2003).

Students learn grammar through communication without memorization, repetition, and grammar drills. In order to achieve a communicative goal, students will learn grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary in the context of real-world topics and tasks. For example:

- Teaching past tense—students work with description of an event from their past.
- Teaching future tense—students make plans for their career after graduation.
- Teaching adjectives—students describe something or someone.
- Therefore, a communicative approach is a student-oriented and more engaging method of teaching an L2 that allows students to develop different language skills through communicative activities and exchange of real-life messages.

COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES

Teaching is not about transferring to students what teachers know for the students to memorize, but rather to inspire students to interact and communicate (Lujan & DiCarlo, 2005). In an L2 classroom, communicative activities play an important role in engaging students through interaction, practice of the TL, and learning from each other. Lui and Dall’Alba (2012) explain how group work and group projects enhance learning outcomes. According to their study, students improved their communicative skills by learning from others’ perspectives. Additionally, students developed their cultural competence by working in groups.

AlKandari (2012) mentions that most students are more interested in participating in class when they are motivated and when the course work requires more involvement. As a student at USU, I certainly appreciated the opportunity to communicate during the lesson through different activities. In the communicative classroom, the teachers have to provide communicative instruction and activities which have communicative goals related to real-life situations (Ballman, Liskin-Gasparro, & Mandell, 2001) to develop students’ communicative skills.
This purpose may be achieved by using task-based activities, which are described in the book *The Communicative Classroom* (Ballman et al., 2001). According to the authors, activities that have a communicative goal and ensure communication are called *task-based activities*. For these types of activities, students should have a reason for doing something and understand why they do it. Task-based activities should be related to each other, be connected to the same goal, and be relevant to real-life situations. I applied these types of activities in my Russian class and noticed that my students really enjoyed it. When students participate, they find it enjoyable since they can role-play, pretend, and learn about different topics related to the real life world.

Ballman et al. (2001) describe *interview activities* as a type of student interaction that promotes communication. During these types of activities “students are paired up to use a series of questions to interview each other” (p. 71). Interview activities help create a meaningful context for target language use. Ballman et al. (2001) also propose *information gap activities* in communicative classrooms which provide students with opportunities for negotiation, “with different but complementary pieces of information that must be combined to successfully accomplish the goal of the activity” (p. 74). Because they cannot complete the task without meaningful interaction with each other, information gap activities require students to work in teams.

AlKandari (2012) also describes classroom participation activities. Among such activities, the most popular are discussion-based activities, during which the teacher and the students are involved in discussing a topic related to a communicative goal. Usually, the instructor leads the discussion by asking questions in order to motivate students to share their ideas and involve students in communication and interaction. Classroom activities also include group work. According to Cunningham-Atkins, Powell and Moore (2004), working in groups positively affects students’ participation and encourages students to share their ideas.

**LEARNING BENEFITS OF A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH**

The communicative approach provides leaners with more freedom and more responsibility. Instructional materials are varied, often open-ended, and designed for small group interaction. The teacher provides students with opportunities for negotiation of meaning and the communication and interpretation of real-life messages. The students’ role is not to repeat what the teacher says but rather to practice the language by using the language (Lee & VanPatten, 2003).
According to Narciss and Koerndle (2008), acquiring communication skills is only possible “if students develop skills in understanding and producing oral and written texts” (p. 281). Through communication learners develop comprehension and interpretation. The characteristics of the grammar-drive approach and the communicative approach are summarized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammar drill</th>
<th>Communicative approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-centered</td>
<td>Student-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning through repetition and memorization</td>
<td>Learning through communication and creation of real-life messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers talk takes most lesson time</td>
<td>Students’ speaking takes priority over teacher’s speaking in the class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No communication and discussion in class</td>
<td>Students have more freedom and responsibilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Comparison grammar drill and communicative approach

In other words, the main benefits of the communicative approach are:

- The development of all language skills
- The creation of a less boring and a more engaging environment. This leads to greater motivation, which in turn leads to greater achievement in learning.

CONCLUSION

Through my teaching practice I have learned that in L2 instruction it is important to understand that every method has its role. When a teacher uses different methods and activities it will greatly benefit learners with different abilities and needs. Grammar instruction will be most beneficial when it supports a communicative goal. In this way, students learn different aspects of an L2, improve different language skills, and learn L2 grammar and vocabulary through communication and creation of real-life messages.

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ABSTRACT

A good deal of research focuses on what teachers need to prod their students to do, what sort of situations they need to set-up for students, to get the best language learning outcomes. However, the effectiveness of teachers and the effectiveness of the classroom environments in promoting learning is broader than the activities around which lesson plans are built. This article explores the use of feedback, and what the teacher can do and how the teacher can turn over the responsibility for learning to the students to promote critical thinking and learning.

Keywords: critical thinking, feedback, language learning.

In the summer of 2014, I took a Teacher Education and Leadership (TEAL) course that pushed me to focus on my role as a teacher and its impact on my students’ learning. Was I creating a language learning environment that fostered not only the acquisition of language, but also critical thinking? After all, the best language learning includes more than the mastery of vocabulary and syntax. Pragmatically capable second language (L2) learners have to be able to view the world more broadly than they initially did upon embarking on L2 learning. As I have been ruminating on the texts for this course, I have also been reflecting on my work in past semesters, and what adjustments I want to make in my future teaching. How can I be a better teacher, how do I prepare my students to be better learners? I was teaching ESL at Utah State University’s Global Academy during that same summer as well, so I began testing out the improvements that this TEAL course inspired me to make immediately. As I consider hooks (2010) and Freire (2005), the main texts for the course, I see three themes emerging, three things that I want to implement better in my classroom. 1) I am realizing
how I need to open myself up to my students in vulnerability and love. 2) The words I love are a great medium through which to teach—however it’s not what I do with the words, but what the students do with them that will determine their learning. 3) My students’ success in learning will be enhanced if evaluation guides them to improvement, rather than just punishing them for the progress they have not yet made.

A TEACHER’S HEART EXPOSED

In high school, I had a teacher I loved. It was very obvious that she loved us, because she talked about us as people. Part of our personhood included being students, but she did not act as though that was all there was to us. Recognizing that this teacher’s love fostered our efforts as students to learn—or as bell hooks’ students once told her, “the more you loved us, the harder we had to work” (2010, p. 163)—I have become aware that I need to develop such a capacity for love to create a classroom environment that will promote the kind of work ethic I wish to see in my students. One way in which this is accomplished is through exposing our flawed humanity to our students, rather than trying to keep of a robotic façade of false perfection.

I have learned that students need the freedom to fail, in order to take the risks necessary for success. What was eye-opening to me was the concept presented by hooks (2010), that we allow students this freedom by allowing them to see our imperfectness. We need to demonstrate use of the content we teach, but also how it is learned through sometimes imperfect use (Shrum & Glisan, 2010). It is not sufficient to tell students they will make mistakes and that is okay, but rather “by making ourselves vulnerable we show our students that they can take risks, that they can be vulnerable, that they can have confidence that their thoughts, their ideas will be given appropriate consideration and respect” (hooks, 2010, p. 57).

In the past, I have been nervous to share with my students the setbacks that I have had when I was in their position, for fear that they would doubt my reliability as a resource for the subject they were studying with me. However, I decided during the aforementioned summer to have a bit more courage and test hooks (2010) and Freire in their assertions that “a demonstration of being human and limited” (Freire, 2005, p. 87) as a teacher will actually inspire more confidence in students and that “it also helps to promote an atmosphere of safety wherein mistakes can be made, wherein students can learn to take full responsibility for gauging their learning skills so that they are not teacher-dependent” (hooks, p. 161). The first week of class with my ESL students in Global Academy, I did not just tell them it was better to ask a stupid question than to remain stupid by not asking the
question—I shared with them the experience I had had, which taught me that. It was embarrassing, but my students laughed with me, not at me—and they asked me lots of questions throughout the course.

My L2 learning experience was not in the L2 or even L1 of any of the ESL students I then had; however my experience could be applied generally to their second language acquisition (SLA). Sharing my initial failure and the long route I took to overcome it not only illustrates for my students the value in asking about what they are unsure of, it can also reduce their fear that they will be judged when they expose what they do not yet know.

When I teach German, my personal anecdote also has the added benefit of presenting the language application I spent so long failing at through the interesting medium of narrative. As hooks (2010) points out, there is power in teaching through our stories; this power even has application in the language classroom. I have found in the semesters since I have exposed my humanness more to my students that they have become more willing participants in their education. Teaching by example the benefits of learning through questioning has been more effective than teaching by admonition.

It was a bit nerve-wracking to illustrate for my students the responsibility they had in their learning, through an experience in which I had failed to do so and the consequences I suffered as a result. However, doing so, I realize I have experienced what hooks describes when she says, “letting students know that they were participants in creating and sustaining a constructive classroom dynamic helped to lessen my initial sense that it was solely my responsibility to make the classroom an interesting learning place” (2010, p.118). It was not just that I was lessening my stress as a teacher; by opening myself up so my students could understand their responsibility, I was actually showing them how to truly be learners, because “studying requires the development of rigorous discipline, which we must consciously forge in ourselves. No one can bestow or impose such discipline on someone else; the attempt implies a total lack of knowledge about the educator’s role” (Freire, 2005, p.52). I needed to turn over the responsibility for their learning to my students, not for my sake, but for theirs.

WORDS AND THE (NEW) WORLDS THEY CAN CREATE

In elaborating on how students take an active role in their learning, Freire describes how the relationship that readers have with written words forms their understanding of the world. As he says, “to study is to uncover; it is to gain a more exact comprehension of an object; it is to realize its relationship to other objects. This implies a requirement for risk taking and venturing on
the part of a student, the subject of learning, for without that they do not create or re-create” (2005, p.40).

Reading facilitates learning when it becomes more than a “mechanical” (Freire, 2010, p. 34) process of interpreting symbols as words—when those words are exchanged, reworked, and given new life not only by the writer, but also the readers who receive them.

As my experience with my ESL students, and the German students who followed them, illustrates, personal “stories [can] become the sparks that ignite a deeper passion for learning” (hooks, 2020, p.52). However, it is not just the personal anecdotes teachers share in class that drive learning. As a student of literature in my undergraduate career, I recognize in my experience, and want my students to also experience how, as Freire has said, “reading is an intellectual, difficult, demanding operation, but a gratifying one […] not just that […] reading is engaging; it is a creative experience around comprehension, comprehension and communication” (2005, pp. 34-35). As the work of Reagan (2005) and McLaren (2007) illustrates, we deprive ourselves of knowledge when we exclude from our study the firsthand narratives of those we are trying to learn about. It seems absurd that the scientific community of which Reagan writes would be so oblivious to what their neighbors on college campuses, in the humanities departments, seem to understand instinctively—to understand the human world one has to explore human voices. What this means for language teachers is that for students to understand the language communities they enter by learning their L2, they need experience with L2 voices. Students need the opportunity to work extensively with L2 narratives, not just L2 structures.

The humanities’ way of understanding people through what they create is perhaps less precise than some of the methods used in the sciences, because the instruments for measuring—fellow humans—are not uniform. However, as Kincheloe (2006) makes apparent in his call for critical ontology, sometimes scientific study has excluded too much of the essential humanness of the subject being studied, and not enough of the human bias of those doing the studying. Hall’s (1996) treatment of European study of orientalism highlights how humans can go awry in their study of “others.” However, sometimes the human effort to know others, even if the method is somewhat flawed, leads to a human sense of understanding—as another experience from my time in the Global Academy illustrates. I wanted to share an idea of Goethe’s (Germany’s 18th-century version of Shakespeare) with one of my fellow teachers from Egypt. When I asked my co-worker if he was familiar with Goethe, he answered yes, because Goethe had been interested in (and written about) “orientalism.” My colleague’s sentiment
focused not on where this European’s characterization of the “Orient” had gone wrong, but rather on Goethe’s interest in the world of Islam, making him relevant to the Muslim world.

There is much potential to know the world as we make room for the various voices it holds. It is true that humanities disciplines have traditionally not done a sufficiently well-rounded job in selecting the voices they have chosen to listen to when their professed aim was to fully understand humanity. However, this has been improved, as previously excluded voices assert themselves more and are given space, rather than continuing to be pushed to the margins (hooks, 2010).

**TO PROMOTE LEARNING, NOT PUNISH IT OUT OF EXISTENCE**

It is not just in determining curriculum that more thought should be given to what has previously been excluded. Freire voices a concern that I also have, “we evaluate to punish and almost never to improve . . . we evaluate to punish and not to educate” (2005, p. 13). When we test only for how much of what we thought was important our students took notice of, and fail to also ask about what they were fascinated to learn, we create a culture in which “having successfully regurgitated the material, [students] feel no need to hold onto the knowledge once it has been used to meet the material demands of the course” (hooks, 2010, p. 43). For this reason, “it is impossible for education to take place within a context where a discipline-and-punish model” (hooks, 2010, p. 111) is the method of evaluating student work.

There is a long-held notion that assessing what has not been learned creates a representation of what has been learned. However, such a model does not allow us to give our students the opportunity to tell us what they learned that we did not think to ask about. A fellow classmate of mine, and compatriot of Freire’s, who had come to Utah State as a Fulbright language-teaching assistant from Brazil, once shared an activity that he used to motivate his ESL students. In order to help his students realize the progress they were making, he had them identify one thing they learned in class each day. I have implemented my colleague’s idea in such a way that a section of my weekly evaluations call for my students to illustrate what they have learned in class, not just tell me what skill or principle I taught, but show me how they can use it. Like the “can-do” statements promoted by ACTFL (2015), this places the focus on what students can actually do with the language they are learning. However, with this set-up, it is the students, not the teacher, who determine which aspect of the week’s in-class focus to demonstrate they can apply. I began this practice thinking it was a way to
reward students for what they were learning that I might not specifically ask about—and it does do that. An unexpected benefit of turning over more responsibility to my students in the choice of what to show me they have learned is the regular feedback it gives me on how effectively I am teaching—how effective, or not, the input I provide is. Not all input becomes something learned, yet more is learned than what teachers focus on explicitly (VanPatten & Williams, 2007). This feedback from my students on what they have and have not yet processed from input to intake enables me to better adjust the focus of the curriculum to fit the actual needs of my class. Since I believe, as hooks does, that my students “need not to think as I do. My hope is that by learning to think critically they will be self-actualizing and self-determining” (2010, p. 183), I have to assess them in a way that enables them to express what they do think, and why, rather than evaluating how much of what I think they can remember. I also have to prepare them to be evaluated in such a way—because it is not likely what they have been trained for in their previous education (Freire, 2005; hooks, 2010). In terms of language teaching, promoting this type of critical thinking is most applicable to the way in which I teach the attendant cultures of the languages that I teach. The Brothers Grimm or the Duden might get to rewrite the rules of German orthography, but this is not an area where I encourage self-determination on the part of my students. I recognize that as a human being with real lived experiences I cannot be a neutral source (despite my best efforts) in teaching about target cultures (LoCastro, 2012). Even when I am teaching my native language and culture, I realize that I am only one voice among many (LoCastro, 2012); therefore, using written and oral media I bring a number of authentic voices into the classroom and then “playing the devil’s advocate by asking [sometimes] difficult, probing questions” (LoCastro, 2012, p. 244), I endeavor to get my students thinking about not only the target culture, but also their own. Thinking about how we may be viewed by others can alter the way we view them (Chun, 2011).

Besides failing to sufficiently address what students have learned, as opposed to just memorized for the test, an evaluation model focused on punishing mistakes, rather than rewarding for what is learned, can make it too dangerous to risk failure—too dangerous for students to express their own ideas rather than parroting what the teacher said. If we tell students that they should expect to make mistakes as they progress towards mastering a subject, that it is normal and ok, and then punish them when they make these mistakes, we undermine our message. As Freire (2005) has pointed out, our actions speak louder than (and will be believed over) our words when they do not correspond.
At some point, semesters end and we do need to somehow gauge how much students have learned and communicate to them and to the next instructors they will have how adequately they have mastered the subject of the class. I am not arguing for a completely ambiguous grading system. I have found it useful, and my students seem to agree, that providing feedback and allowing students time to rework their assignments before giving a final grade not only facilitates learning, but requires responsibility on the students’ part that might not otherwise be present.

CONCLUSION

In the works of Freire (2005) and hooks (2010) particularly, though not exclusively, I have found some of the tools that I have been looking for to help my students be as excited about their learning as I am. I need not only to love my students, but show them how to take the risks that will be necessary to really learn and grow. I can share the words written in the field that I teach, but that will not be enough to expand my students’ participation in the world, if I don’t also teach my students to take responsibility for what they do with those words. As I am expecting my students to take responsibility for their learning, I need to focus my evaluation on their work, not on punishing them for what they have not mastered, but on guiding improvement and acknowledging (so that I can help them recognize) what they do know.

REFERENCES


