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Second Language Acquistion Digital Teaching Materials: Unit 10: Balancing Form- and Meaning- focused Instruction

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UNIT #10: BALANCING FORM AND MEANING IN INSTRUCTION 2

10.1 WHAT WE'LL COVER IN THIS UNIT

Here in unit 10 we will bring our discussion of how language are learned to a conclusion. Perhaps you are expecting that the promise of our coursebook's title *How Language Are Learned* will be fulfilled, and all will be revealed unto you. By now, though, you know that the field of second language acquisition is developing an understanding of how languages are learned, it is refining set of questions about language learning, collecting new data, and developing ever better theories with which this very complex phenomenon can be understood. In this unit, after noting two important issues concerning the teaching of grammar, or form, we will then cover the final three approaches. Specifically, will cover the following:

—Further notes on ideas about teaching grammar

—"Get two for one" – an approach based on bilingual education

—"Teach what is teachable" – an approach noting the limits of teaching

—"Get it right in the end" – the state-of-the-art approach

10.2 FURTHER NOTES ON IDEAS ABOUT TEACHING GRAMMAR

Before we look at the last three proposals, two important points should be made about teaching grammar. We all believe that having an element of form focus is essential to learning, but what are some important ideas about how it might be done? First we'll talk about applying a skill acquisition approach to learning, and then we'll have a look at "noticing".

10.1.1 LANGAUGE LEARNING AS SKILL LEARNING

Much of what we have been focusing on – and what the field in general focuses on – is the issue of how language form is learned and how the classroom can be set up to assist this. In his article "Beyond focus

on form: Cognitive perspectives on learning and practicing second language grammar" Robert DeKeyser raises the question of how can students move from knowing the declarative knowledge about language – that is, the knowledge of the rule or the construction – to automatized use of that language? Put another way, where teaching grammar is appropriate, how do learners go from knowing about grammar to using it?

To answer this question, DeKeyser draws on the research on skill acquisition from cognitive psychology and the proposed three stages: declarative, procedural, and automatic. In learning a complex skill such as a playing a musical instrument, driving, sports, and speaking a second language, the learning of subskills may following the path of moving from having declarative knowledge about the skill — say knowledge of
a grammar rule — to the automatic use of that language construction that the grammar rule has described. But how is this done? As DeKeyser points out, automatic, fast and efficient use of at grammatical construction does not involved the speeded up application of declarative knowledge. Something else happens, and it happens in the proceduralization stage. There, knowledge is transformed through carrying out the skill in a controlled manner. One clear example of this is typing: when you can "touch type", without looking at your hands, you are not doing this by very quickly recalling where the keys are on the keyboard. Your fingers seem to "know" where the right keys are, and in fact you end up typing combinations of letters and whole words in one go. In other words, your knowledge of where the letters are has been transformed into procedures which underly "fluent" typing. DeKeyser is pointing out that the same applies to second language learning.

But here DeKeyser makes a key point: in order to successfully move to the automatic stage, when speed and accuracy increases, you must go through the proceduralization stage by engaging in the activity with the declarative knowledge in mind, and that activity is meaningful language use. What he is saying, then, is that traditional "drills" where, say, sentences are transformed in isolation from communication, are not actual language use, but are simply "language-like behavior". While the explicit, declarative knowledge gained from such a drill might be useful in learning, is it the next stage which is essential to language learning: using newly learned language knowledge while carrying out actual communication. It's a sublet point, but an essential one: from and meaning connections must be made in actual language use in order to develop the language system. Talking about language form is useful, but it is only one step in the process.

10.1.2 NOTICING

When we think of teaching and learning form, we often think of students memorizing grammar rules or understanding complex explanations from the teacher. Both of these might be quite useful, but we also understand that teachers simply pointing out that a form is at work in a particular context and students becoming aware of the form-meaning connections in that context is also a quite valuable goal of teaching and learning. What we are talking about here is, of course, "noticing".

Quite a lot has been written about noticing over the past years, and some strong positions have been taken, such as the view which claims that only form-meaning connections which are noticed by a learner that is, which a learner is aware of – can be learned and integrated into the linguistic system. Whether or not we believe in this strong view of noticing, a workable hypothesis is that focusing attention and awareness on form-meaning connections can have a positive impact on learning. And, if we think of the French-English adverb placement example we saw in a previous unit, simply knowing that a form exists

may be enough to learn it. Certainly, noticing form-meaning connections in language use has a positive effect, and teachers efforts to help learners do so, and learners developing skills and awareness in this area, is quite important.

The point then is that when we think of "grammar teaching", there are a variety of activities which fall under that heading, and helping students "notice" form and meaning connections in use may be a powerful first step in learning or it in itself be sufficient to change the developing linguistic system.

10.2 —"GET TWO FOR ONE" – AN APPROACH BASED ON BILINGUAL EDUCATION

There's a good chance that many of you have experienced bilingual education programs in primary or secondary school. These programs range from the CLIL – Content and Language Integrated Learning – programs where single courses or topics are taught in a foreign language, to immersion programs in English or German, or Hungarian language programs run outside of the borders of Hungary. What all of these diverse programs share is the teaching of content courses in the foreign or minority language, thus giving students extensive changes to use the language intensively for a course or for many years of extensive study. We should also add to this list university-level language major programs where most courses are taught in the foreign language --meaning that probably all of you taking this course are involved in bilingual education.

Before we go on, it's worth taking stock of how you feel about the efficacy of these programs. Is it possible to simultaneously learning both language and content?

READING TASK: CAN CONTENT AND LANGUAGE BE LEARNED TOGETHER?

Reading the following brief comment by the authors of our textbook on learning language and content together. How effective do you think it is? Does the learning of content suffer? Are there problems with language learning or areas which are not effective?

Can students can learn both language and academic content simultaneously in classes where the subject matter is taught in their second language?

The advantages of content-based instruction are numerous. Motivation is increased when the material that is used for language teaching has an inherent value to the students: it creates a genuine, immediate need to learn the language. Content-based instruction is also often associated with the opportunity to spend more time in contact with the language, without losing out on instruction in other subject matter. In addition, the range of vocabulary and language features that students encounter in learning academic subjects is more varied than that which is typically available in second and foreign language classes.

Research has confirmed that students in content-based and immersion classes develop comprehension skills, vocabulary, and general communicative competence in the new language. Teachers and researchers

have also found, however, that the ability to understand the content and to function in classroom interaction does not ensure that students will continue to improve in certain aspects of their second language, especially in areas of accuracy on language features that do not usually interfere with meaning. Thus, for example, students can spend years in French immersion without achieving accuracy in marking nouns for gender or verbs for tense. Experimental studies in which an element of form-focused instruction was added to the content-based instruction have shown that, with guidance, students can improve in

these areas as well. Both students and teachers need to keep in mind that content-based instruction is also

language teaching.

—Lightbown and Spada 2013:175

Do the above paragraphs meet your experiences? They point out that there are numerous advantages to participating in bilingual education ranging from motivation and time in contact with the language. Certainly these classes allow for the possibility of actually using language in a more intense way than usually happens in foreign language classes, and students. At a minimum, this vast experience results in superior abilities in comprehending language and in knowledge of how to use academic language. But they do note some drawbacks was well, despite the overwhelming benefits, and these, again, as we've come to expect, deal with learning the details and fine points of language form, and being able to use them in practice. We'll explore this in a little more detail below.

10.2.1 CANADIAN FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAMS

A great amount of research has been done in Canada in their French immersion programs which have identified issues with students receiving a great amount of comprehensible input, without much focus on form our "output", or production. This was certainly the case decades ago, and a great amount of research on this problem led to changes and a greater understanding of the role of the teaching of form and of language production. Swain's 1985 study is representative of this era.

Swain studied 6th graders who has experience French immersion programs since kindergarten, and thus who has received nearly seven years of French input in the classroom. Her question was: how do these students compare with their native French speaking counter parts? First is should be noted that in terms of academic content knowledge, these students scored just as well as native speaking French students. That is, they clearly can comprehend French as at a native speaker level.

But what about the details of their French language knowledge? Swain used a series of oral and written tests of language that focused on grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence. She was able to show that compared with native speaking students, immersion students scored worse on grammatical competence, but equally as well on sociolinguistic and discourse competence except where the grammatical system was in the focus. For example, they scored worse where verb tense use was the focus on story retelling, or where conditional was used to show politeness. Thus these students were

clearly fluent in French after nearly seven years of French immersion, but they were not as good at French as native speaking children? Swain wondered why this was.

Swains answer to this question is that while students received plenty of comprehensible input, they did no engage in output – at that time in the way the programs were configured. She claimed they were not producing enough output, and that that output was not "pushed output", that is, output which challenges students to extend their linguistic resources. (In an earlier unit we saw some of Swain's later research where she put students in situations where they would be challenged to produce output.)

According to Swain, what output allows students to do is the test hypotheses about the language and then receive feedback on those guesses and also to develop automaticity in the language in the process. Importantly she notes that producing output in these contexts allows for the movement from "semantic to syntactic processing", that is moving from simply getting the message across to doing so in an
appropriate and efficient way using the required level of sophistication. Thus output, or practice, does not only involve practicing what one has already learned, but learning and development can happen through the right kind of practice, and in 1985, this was what was missing in the French immersion programs in Canada.

10.2.2 A NOTE ON IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT LEARNING

In the popular mind, or in the folk linguistic view, what is happening in immersion programs is that students are simply "picking up" the language. Some people might think of this as "implicit learning", that is, learning when there is no awareness of what is being learned or that learning is happening at all. Yet, what Swain' research above points to – and most all of the research that the field of second language acquisition is based on – is that explicit learning, that is being aware of form and meaning connections – is beneficial, if not essential, for learning. Thus an explicit, form-focused component to input-based programs is vital. Concerning the possibility of implicit learning, it is clear that there is mostly like a "data- driven" system of implicit learning which is engaged when we are using language and that is most likely operates on a local level. Thus, of example, we might find that we know how certain words collocate with each other without ever having made that explicit connection ourselves. This is different, though, than implicitly learning complex, non-local rules of language. Needless to say, there is intense debate about these issues in the field, but it is safe to assume that any models of second language acquisition based entirely on implicit or explicit learning will be flawed. Surely the answer is in these systems working together. The research on the French immersion programs shows this.

In summary, then, the various bilingual programs have shown the power of learning through intensive and extensive language use, and they have shown the necessity of some kind of form-focused instruction and output in connection with it.

10.3 "TEACH WHAT IS TEACHABLE" – AN APPROACH NOTING THE LIMITS OF TEACHING

This proposal can be thought of more as an essential idea to keep in mind while teaching , rather than kind of programmatic approach to teaching. It addresses the question of why somethings are difficult for students to learn even after being instructed repeatedly on that point, and why some things are easier to learn – and why those things which were once considered difficult are easier at a later time.

The answer to this question lies with the difference between developmental and variational features of language. Developmental features are those elements of language which must be learned in a particular order due to them being part of a developmental system. As we've seen before, question formation in English is one of these systems. Variational features, on the other hand, can be, broadly speaking, learned in any order and any time. An example of variational features would be vocabulary words. Although they form a complex system most many words can be learned at any time.

Concerning question formation, we've seen previously question learning can be divided in to six stages, and we've also seen who learners move though these stages systematically. But what is the impact of instruction? Interestingly, research on English question and also on basic German word order has shown that instruction cannot make students skip stages, but if a student is ready to move to the next stage,
then instruction can help the student move to that stage more quickly. Thus this explains why instruction sometimes doesn't seem to work, and then it suddenly does. It's not the case that something is "too difficult" to learn, but that it's a different stage. When that stage is reached, it will not be too difficult. This is a vital point to keep in mind.
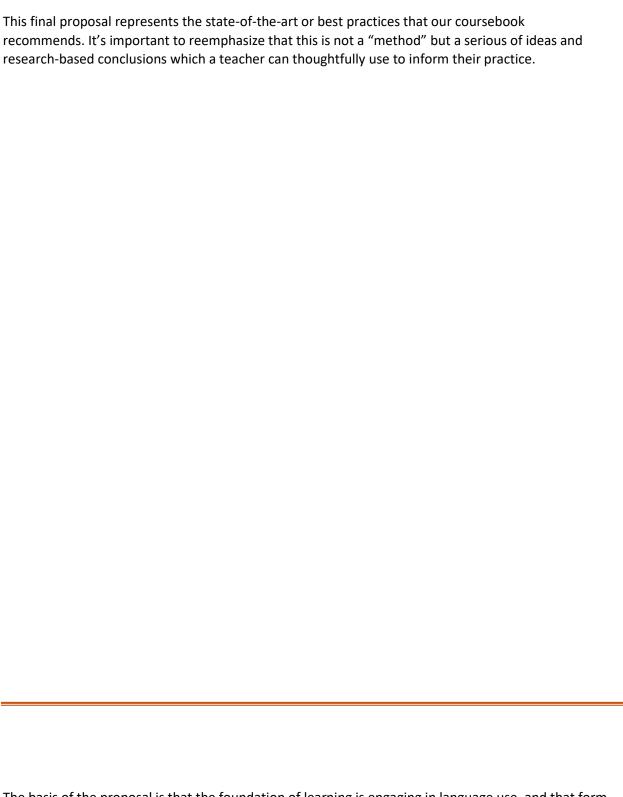
To read an example of research which has helped develop this important idea, check out the following study:

English question formation and "teach what is teachable":

Mackey, A. 1999. 'Input, interaction and second language development: An empirical study of question formation in ESL.' Studies in Second Language Acquisition 21/4: 557–87.

10.4 "GET IT RIGHT IN THE END" – THE STATE-OF-THE-ART APPROACH

The basis of the proposal is that the foundation of learning is engaging in language use, and that form should be taught in communicative context. That is, form-focused instruction, done in the right way, if vital, but not everything needs to be taught. As we've seen some elements of language can be

This final proposal represents the state-of-the-art or best practices that our coursebook recommends. It's important to reemphasize that this is not a "method" but a serious of ideas and research-based conclusions which a teacher can thoughtfully use to inform their practice.

The basis of the proposal is that the foundation of learning is engaging in language use, and that form should be taught in communicative context. That is, form-focused instruction, done in the right way, if vital, but not everything needs to be taught. As we've seen some elements of language can be

simply by becoming aware of them, while others may need extensive practice. As we've also seen, certain forms may need to be learned in certain stages.

At the same time, learning is happening though input, interaction, and output. This is not something which can wait until later, or after "the exam" has been passed. Learning and language use are bound together, and any program should provide students with continuous opportunities to use the language throughout instruction. Furthermore, there is need to wait until advanced levels to use the language. As we saw in the previously unit, even beginners can benefit greatly by comprehension-based use of language. Much language acquisition can develop naturally.

The focus on form approach promoted in our coursebook will eventually lead to permanent change, but there may not be immediate change. The emphasis is on getting it right in the end, that there is a cumulative effect of focusing on form and meaning connections. Focus on these connections might need to be done thought practice, but awareness raising and noticing might be sufficient.

Different features may require different types and amount of instruction. L1s certainly play a role in which structures require different approaches, as do different students. Also individual differences are important: high aptitude students who are learning their second or third foreign language will approach learning differently than someone learning their first foreign language.

We've seen in the previous proposals that exclusive focus on form is problematic, as is exclusive focus on meaning. The "get it right from the beginning" approach is no only too focused on grammar instruction, but the emphasis on accuracy from the beginning runs counter to key research findings in the second language acquisition literature. In the end, what is most recommended is providing changes for student to have a form-focused experience with corrective feedback with a context where they can express and comprehend meaningful language.

VIDEO TASK: FINAL VIEWS ON EFFECTIVE CLASSROOMS

As part of the conclusion to this unit. Watch the following video where Lightbown and Spada talk about how effective classrooms should be set up. What principles do you think they will mention?

Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada on effective instruction:

> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxMpgcIkfOo

As you can see, the speak about the key issue of not having an exclusive focus on form or on meaning. They also speak of the variety of different programs that can be created, all of which approach this teaching and learning in a slightly different way.

Finally, what are we left with in terms of how we should answer the question of how languages are learned? We've seen a wide variety of research and ideas in these 10 lessons, and they lead us not to a new program or method that can be implemented in the classroom, but they lead us to a set of ideas and questions. Indeed as we've seen, the field of second language acquisition moves ahead by coming up with more refined questions, new theories and more extensive data. In the end anyone entering the classroom as a teacher is left with the following issues to consider:

Key questions that teachers need to consider:

-–What's the right form-meaning balance?

—Which features need to be taught, which can be picked up?

—Which learners do best with metalinguistic information, and which do not?

—When is it best to focus on form?

—How should corrective feedback be given?

The field of second language acquisition can help teachers become more informed about these issues and make good decisions with them in their own teaching and learning context.

10.5 SUMMARY OF THIS UNIT

This unit began by considering some key issues about learning: language learning as skill learning, and the effects of noticing. Also, later in the unit we looked at the key issue of implicit and explicit learning. We also reviewed the final three proposals for teaching and learning in the classroom. In the end we found that the study of second language acquisition outlines and informs a series of key questions that teachers need to consider.

Click on the following link for a PowerPoint presentation to hear a summary and concluding remarks concerning unit 10.

Summary and conclusions for unit 10

10.6 KEY CONCEPTS DEVELOPED IN THIS UNIT

Declarative knowledge

Proceduralization

Noticing

Bilingual education

Output

Pushed output

Implicit learning

Explicit learning

Developmental features

Variational features

10.7 REFERENCES MENTIONED IN THIS UNIT.

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