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Second Language Acquisition Digital Teaching Materials: Unit 8 Classroom Language Learning

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SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

UNIT #8: CLASSROOM LANGUAGE LEARNING

8.1 WHAT WE'LL COVER IN THIS UNIT

In this unit we'll take a look at teaching and learning in the classroom, and will focus on a key issue: what should the balance be between teaching which emphasizes grammar and that which emphasizes communication. First we'll look at different types of classroom, and then focus in detail on error correction. We'll cover the following topics:

- Structure-based teaching and communicative teaching
- Student-student interaction: negotiation of meaning and negotiation of form
- Error correction
- Form-focused instruction

8.2 STRUCTURE-BASED AND COMMUNICATIVE TEACHING

What have the classrooms you have been a part of been like? Many times classrooms can be divided into those which focus on structure, that is grammar, or form, and those that focus on successful communication. First, let's take stock of your experience. What has it been like in classes where the main focus is on structure? What has it been like where the main focus is on communication?

REFLECTION TASK: EXPLORING YOUR EXPERIENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

In the following table, indicate with a + or a – if the feature is likely to be found in structure-based classes or communicative classes. Use a ? if you don't know. In the table "metalinguistic comments" refers to discussion about language using the terminology of grammar and linguistics. Genuine questions are those that the person asking them doesn't know the answer to. And negotiation for meaning, refers to

speakers modifying their speech so as to repair breakdowns in communication. After looking at your results, we'll discuss typical classrooms and look at examples.

What are the characteristics of structure-based and communicative classrooms based on your experience?

	Structure-based	Communicative
Language focus		
Range of language		
Explicit feedback on errors		
Metalinguistic comments		
Genuine questions		
Negotiation for meaning		

If your experience is like most people's you may have found the following pattern:

	Structure-based	Communicative
Language focus	+	-
Range of language	-	+
Explicit feedback on errors	+	-
Metalinguistic comments	+	-
Genuine questions	-	+
Negotiation for meaning	-	+

Specifically, you may have found that structure-based classes place more of an emphasis on the form of language and focus on learning about the language in isolations, while communicative classrooms focus on the message and how to use language in context. In a structure-based classroom there may have been a limited range of language use, but in the communicative classroom there was a wide variety of language used at one time – very much like real life. In the structure-based classroom there may have been heavy emphasis on error correction, whereas in the communicative classroom there was limited overt error correction, but rather correction done through negotiation. Finally in communicative language teaching there are more genuine questions and negotiation of meaning as seeking out information and negotiation if there is a misunderstanding are hallmarks of real communication.

Let's look at examples of the above characteristics from actual transcripts of interaction from classes which either follow a structural or communicative orientation. These examples come from our coursebook (Lightbown & Spada 2013:131-133)

In the following example, we can see the focus on language in the structure-based approach, and the focus on the message in the communicative approach. T stands for teacher, and S for student:

Structure-based: Focus on language

T OK, we finished the book-we finished in the book Unit 1, 2, 3. Finished. Workbook 1, 2, 3. So today we're going to start with Unit 4. Don't take your books yet, don't rake your books. In 1, 2, 3 we worked in what tense? What tense did we work on? OK?

S Past.

T In the past-What auxiliary in the past? S Did

Communicative: Focus on message

S It bugs me when a bee sting me.

T Oh, when a bee stings me.

S Stings me.

T Do you get stung often? Does that happen often? The bee stinging many times? S Yeah.

In the structure-based class, the target language is being used, but the point seems to be solely to communicate about the grammar of English. In the communicative example, we can see an actual conversation happens. But do note one thing in this transcript, the teacher corrects the student with a "recast" where he or she says back to the student "stings me" after the student said "strings me". This is indeed focus on the message, but focus on the language is subtly present, too.

Next we'll look at the range of language and interaction that goes on in each type of class. Immediately it can be seen that the structure-based class utilizes a small number of words and structures than the communicative class.

Structure-based: Limited range of language

T Yes? What is it?

S Little bit.

T A little bit

Communicative: Wide variety of language

S It bugs me when my brother takes my bicycle. Every day.

T Every day? Ah! Doesn't your bro---(inaudible) his bicycle? Could his brother lend his bicycle? Uh, your brother doesn't have a bicycle?

S Yeah! A new bicycle (inaudible) bicycle.

T Ah, well. Talk to your mom and dad about it. Maybe negotiate a new bicycle for your brother. S (inaudible)

Furthermore, not only is there more language being used in the communicative class, but the type of interaction is more complex, too. In the structure-based class the teacher is following the “IRE” way of interacting where there is a teacher Initiation, a student Response, and a teacher Evaluation of that response. The conversation in the communicative class involves more natural turns.

Next we'll look at error correction, and what we'll see here is that error correction happens in both classes, but in much different ways and different contexts.

Structure-based: Frequent error correction

T Present continuous? What's that?

S e-n-g

T i-n-g

Communicative: Limited error correction, rather negotiation

T His bicycle! How old is your brother?

S March 23.

T His birthday?

S Yeah!

T And how old was he?

S Fourteen.

In the structure-based class the student asked for the continuous verb ending and is corrected. This error correction and communication happens out of context. In the communicative class, we can see that

there is negotiation of meaning. The student seems to have misunderstood the question, so the teacher engages in a clarification request and then asks the question again. Also recall the in-communication error correction which we saw in the first example in the communicative class.

Furthermore, as would be expected, there is a large difference in the two classes concerning the types of questions that are being asked. The structure-based class uses few genuine questions, but rather display questions where the teacher knows the answer to the question before the student answers.

Structure-based: Few genuine questions

T You're playing with your eraser. (writes 'I'm playing with my eraser' on the board). Would you close the door please, Bernard? Claude, what is he doing?

S Close the door.

T He is closing the door.

But notice the following exchange, also in the structure-based class where the teacher asks a display question to elicit and answer in the present continuous but the student accidentally interprets it as a genuine communication thinking that he's being accused of not paying attention!

T What are you doing, Paul?

S Rien [nothing].

T Nothing?

S Rien-nothing.

T You're not doing anything? You're doing something!
S Not doing anything.

Communicative: Many genuine questions

T Martin, who has a new bicycle? You or your brother?

And then it's possible to see the question above in the communicative class where the teacher does not know the answer. In fact, most question are genuine questions in the transcript.

What we can see then are two very different approaches to language in these classrooms. The strength of the communicative classroom is that students are being exposed to actual communication and at the same time, the teacher is subtly directing their attention to language form, to grammar. The strength of the structure-based classroom is that structures can be clearly isolated and discusses – more so than in the communicative class – but little real communication is happening. Thus, we see here two important building blocks of a classroom, the focus on form and the focus on meaning. Achieving a balance between the two and how to set up a classroom where each can simultaneously receive attention will be the subject of the rest of the course, and is the focus of our coursebook.

8.3 STUDENT-STUDENT INTERACTION

Let's follow the same procedure as we did above and look at two different examples of interaction. One task is a classic information gap task where two students, each with an incomplete picture, must work together to create the whole picture. What kind of focus on language and on communication do you think can be found there? The participants in the task are two students in an ESL program in Australia.

The second task is a jigsaw task where two students have a set of pictures which they need to order to make a coherent story, and then they need to write that story. How do you think that the interaction produced by this task will be different than that of the first? The participants are English-speaking

students learning French in Canada. Again, both examples come from Lightbown and Spada 2013 (pp. 137-7).

In both tasks we can

First, concerning the use of genuine questions and negotiation, the transcript has many examples. In the picture description task questions are used quite often, and we can see negotiation of meaning as they try to understand that is missing from their own picture.

Picture description: Genuine questions and negotiation

S2 What's the [tree]? (Imitates Learner 1 's production) S1 Feel?

S2 Fell? Fell down? (Points down)

S1 No, it's not the fell down. No, it's just at the bottom. S2 The bird?

S1 No, the tree.

S2 The tree? (Emphatic stress)

S1 Yes.

Jigsaw story retelling: Genuine questions and negotiation

N non, wait. tout a coup elle ... se souvient? [no, wait ... all of a sudden she ... remembers?] D Je pense pas que c'est se souvient. [I don't think it's remember]

N oh, souvient ... souvient. [oh remember ... remember]

D Elk souvientqu'elle ale chorale. [She remembers that she has choir] N Qu'elle doit se preparer. [that she has to get ready]

D Oui. [Yes]

In the jigsaw story retelling we can see a question asked by N, and then they are negotiating trying to figure out what is happening in the story. Both of these tasks, then, lead students to actual communicative situations where the use of genuine questions and negotiation for meaning. Thus these situations are very much like real communication.

Next let's look at to see if there is explicit linguistic feedback in either of the tasks.

Picture description: Feedback: No explicit. Implicit signals via difficulty

S2 Is a three bird?

S1 Huh?

S2 What's the [tee]?

S1 Huh?

Jigsaw story retelling: No explicit feedback, but metalinguistic reflection (Language Related Episodes)

D Elle souvient [She remembers]

N se souvient ou souvient? [Remembers or remembers?]

D Elle souvient ... ahh, elle se souvient ... Elk souvient ... Elle se souvient, no. [She remembers . . . ahh, she remembers . . . She remembers ... She remembers, no]

In the picture description task we can see that feedback is given in the conversation when one student cannot understand the student. This is an implicit signal which is given. In the jigsaw task, there is also no explicit feedback, but the two students are reflecting on language and thinking about it – in this case which form of the verb to use. In doing this, they are engaging in a “Language Related Episode” or LRE, where students speak about language forms and correct themselves and even the person they are working with.

Finally we will look at whether any metalinguistic language is being used here. That is are the participants using the grammatical or linguistic terminology in solving the problems they are engaged in? In the picture description task we see no use of metalinguistic comments, but in the jigsaw task the situation is quite different.

Jigsaw story retelling: Metalinguistic comments and “negotiation of form”

N Tout a coup elk souvient qu' elle ... do it aller a la chorale [All of a sudden she remembers that she has to go to choir]

D [very softly] elle se souvien ... non. [She remembers ...

no] D Alors, elle [So, she]

N non, wait. tout a coup elle ... se souvient? [no, wait ... all of a sudden she ... remembers?] D Je pense pas que c'est se souvient. [I don't think it's remember]

N oh, souvient ... souvient. [oh remember ... remember]

D Elk souvientqu'elle ale chorale. [She remembers that she has choir] N Qu'elle doit se preparer. [that she has to get ready]

D Oui. [Yes]

N pour le chorale ... non, tout a coup elk souvientqu'il ya une pratique de chorale. [for choir ... no, all of a sudden she remembers that there's a choir practice]

Here we can see that they are essentially solving a language problem together and are not only talking about language, but are essentially engaging in “negotiation of form”. That is, in the context of a communicative situation, a question of language form, grammar, has arisen, and they are working out this problems so as to engage in successful communication when they present their finished story to the class. This is an example of explicitly focusing on grammar while engaging in communication.

What conclusions can we draw from having looked at the two types of classroom and the two types of classroom activities? There are two important dimensions involved in classroom language learning, a focus on form, or grammar, and a focus on meaning, or communication. Each of these aspects are important and are necessary, but in isolation they can be problematic. The completely form-focused approach of the structure-based class would provide little opportunity for actual language use and communication. On the other hand, the picture description task – while certainly useful – could not form the basis of a language learning program. Concerning the communicative class, we saw that there was a subtle focus on form happening in the class which could be developed and exploited by a thoughtful teacher. The solid foundation of communication would be useful for the students, particularly if they could notice the subtle grammar instruction which was going on. Finally the jigsaw task illustrated a unique opportunity for learning where students were engaged in communication and at the same time paying attention to solving a grammatical problem – a problem which appeared to challenge their language knowledge. This “pushed output” – that is encouraging learners to produce language at a slightly more complex level than they are at – could be an idea situation.

We will later find out more about this idea of “focusing on form in a communicative context.”

VIDEO TASK: MODERN SLA THEORY AND CLASSROOM INTERACTION

Our discussion of classroom interaction and learning connects up directly with current theories of second language acquisition. The following is a short clip by Diane Larsen-Freeman, a researcher and teacher, who is explaining how language development happens in classrooms through interaction. Previously to the clip she has introduced “complexity theory” and shown how second language learning is not a straightforward process, but complex, non-linear and emergent in context. Watch her brief discussion of this and note which theories and ideas you’ve heard of before.

Diane Larsen-Freeman speaking on complexity theory and learning through interaction:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTDixDEHpB8>

Larsen-Freeman notes here the that using language changes the grammar in the mind of the speaker. This is essentially what we could see in the Language Related Events which were present in the transcript of the jigsaw task. Language form and meaning were coming together.

8.4 ERROR CORRECTION

An important way of bringing a focus on language form to language use is through error correction or feedback. A great deal has been written on error correction and most all teachers are aware of the efficacy of error correction. As in introduction to this idea, we'll have a look at a commonly held idea that is discussed in our coursebook.

Do you think error correction is important? Why do you think so? What does error correction actually do? Do you think that error correction needs to be done to prevent bad habits? Consider how you feel about this issue and then read the following section.

READING TASK: SHOULD ERRORS BE CORRECTED SO AS TO PREVENT BAD HABITS?

Should learners' errors be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits?

Errors are a natural part of language learning. This is true of the development of a child's first language as well as of second language learning by children and adults. Errors reflect the patterns of learners' developing interlanguage systems —showing gaps in their knowledge, overgeneralization of a second language rule, or an inappropriate transfer of a first language pattern to the second language.

Teachers have a responsibility to help learners do their best, and this includes the provision of explicit, form-focused instruction and feedback on error. When errors are persistent, especially when they are shared by almost all students in a class, it is important to bring the problem to their attention. This does not mean that learners should be expected to adopt the correct form or pattern immediately or consistently. If the error reflects a developmental stage, the instruction or feedback may be useful only when the learner is ready for it. It may be necessary to repeat feedback on the same error many times.

Of course, excessive feedback on error can have a negative effect on motivation; teachers need to be sensitive to their students' reactions to correction. The amount and type of correction that is offered will also vary according to the specific characteristics of the students, as well as their relationship with the teacher and with each other. Children and adults with little education in their first language will not benefit greatly from sophisticated metalinguistic explanations, but university students who are advanced learners of the language may find such explanations of great value. Immediate reaction to errors in an oral communication setting may embarrass some students and discourage them from speaking while others welcome such correction as exactly what is needed to help them notice a persistent error at just the moment when it occurs.

Lightbown and Spada 2013:173

Did reading the above passage change your view of error correction? Many people retain the “error as a bad habit” view even long after they know that second language acquisition is more complex than that. As is pointed out in the above text, errors are a natural part of learning and errors tied to developmental orders may persist long after a teacher has offered correction or long after a learner knows that an error has been made. Teachers need to provide clear explicit grammar instruction and provide information at appropriate times. Students might utilize this information immediately and produce the correct words and forms, but more it is more likely that error correction will help in the correct forms appearing more frequently. It may even be the case that explicit knowledge can only be used much later by students, or might be used in comprehension and not production, or only in cases where language is produced in a controlled and monitored way. The information that is provided by correction is one influence on a highly complex and developing system.

Let’s have a look at a concrete example which show how different structures might require different types of evidence, or information, in order to be learned. Consider the following examples of adverb placement contrast between English and French in the following table:

French adverb placement
example:

S = Subject, V = Verb, O = Object, A = Adverb

1. ASVO

Often, Mary drinks tea.

Souvent, Marie boit du thé.

2. SVOA

Mary drinks tea often.

Marie boit du thé souvent.

3. SAVO

Mary often drinks tea.

*Marie souvent boit du thé

4. SVAO

*Mary drinks often tea.

Marie boit souvent du thé.

–Lightbown and Spada 2013:61

An interesting pattern can be seen in this data. The first two possibilities for adverb placement are the same for both English and French. But the 3rd and 4th rules contrast with each other. Let's take a look at what it might require for a L1 French speaking person to learn the rules of English adverb placement.

The first two rules might simply be learned from positive evidence alone. Positive evidence is simply examples of language which shows that a possible form exists. Students might notice immediately and on their own that English and French are similar in this regard. The 3rd and 4th rules may need more explicit intervention by the teacher. French speakers may be hesitant to use rule number three since it is ungrammatical in French, and in this case the teacher's explicit, form-focused instruction would simply be pointing out the positive evidence that this construction does indeed exist in English. And in fact, many students might find this out for themselves. The 4th rule is problematic, though, since it cannot be learned from positive evidence alone. That is, students may, produce **Mary drinks tea often* based on the influence of transfer from French. In order to learn that this is not possible in English, students would need to accumulate vast experience with the language and then realize that they have never heard anyone else using it, while all along they themselves are producing this incorrect word order. What is necessary here is negative evidence, that is, evidence that something is not possible in the language – and this is exactly what a teacher can do through explicit grammar instruction and error correction. Without this, it will be very difficult for adults to learn this very basic rule of grammar.

There are several important lessons here. First, it shows that not everything needs to be taught. Learners might pick up language on their own through experience as might happen with rules 1 and 2 above. Second, one of the roles of teaching might simply be helping students to notice the forms of the language they are learning. In this case, the teacher would be helping students to simply see that rule three works in English. The teacher here would be helping students add a rule to their system. Third, rule 4 shows that negative evidence and error correction might be needed here. In this case the students are having to “subtract” a rule, or go against a natural tendency based on French and which is strengthened by the seeming similarity of the two languages presented in rules 1 and 2. This make time, and it is an example of something that will be quite difficult to learn without teacher intervention and error correction – and even then, may take time.

So as we can see from the text above and this example, explicit instruction via the provision of negative evidence is a much more complex enterprise than stopping “bad habits”.

8.5 FORM-FOCUSED INSTRUCTION

Before we move on in the next units to look at more concrete proposals for what can be done in the classroom, let's briefly look at the issue of the difference between form-focused instruction and the structure-based classroom. We've seen problems classes which are focused almost entirely on form, that is, grammar. But we also know – as we saw in the previous example of French adverbs – that grammar instruction is not only helpful, but may be essential for learning certain forms. The solution is “form- focused” instruction, where language form is taught in the context of communication and language use. That is, where form, mean, and usage are unified.

8.6 SUMMARY OF THIS UNIT

In this unit we've looked at different ways of organizing classes – entirely focused on structure and grammar and entirely focused on communication and meaning. We also briefly looked at interaction between students and also error correction. From this it appears possible that a kind of form-focused instruction is possible to create without following the negative example of a completely structure based class or curriculum.

Click on the following link for a PowerPoint presentation to hear a summary and concluding remarks concerning unit 8.

[Unit 8 summary and conclusions](#)

8.7 KEY CONCEPTS DEVELOPED IN THIS UNIT

Structure-based teaching

Communicative language teaching

Genuine questions

Display questions

Negotiation for meaning

Negotiation of form

Initiation, Response, Evaluation —

IRE Positive evidence

Negative evidence

Form-focused teaching

8.8 REFERENCES MENTIONED IN THIS UNIT.

Lightbown, Patsy M. and Nina Spada. 2013. *How languages are learned*. (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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