Beyond Methods: Towards an Evidence-based Approach to Language Instruction

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A B S T R A C T

This paper supports the view that language instruction should be evidence and principle-based. Key facts about second language acquisition will be presented highlighting the main implications for language instruction. A principled and evidence-based approach to language instruction is one which takes into consideration the following: (i) a clear understanding of what language is; (ii) a clear understanding of what communication means; (iii) an effective approach to focus on form is one which ties together form and meaning and moves from input to output practice; (iv) input is the key ingredient in language acquisition and L2 learners needs to be exposed to comprehensible and meaningful language input during instruction; (v) interactive tasks might play a facilitative role in the acquisition of a second language.

Keywords: communication; focus on form; input; language; tasks

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Introduction

Over the years, teachers and practitioners have relied on a variety of different teaching methods proposed to inform their teaching. In the 1980s, for example, communicative language teaching was seen as the method of teaching which would essentially bring the learner into closer contact with the target language. Communicative language teaching was considered a student-centered type of instruction, and a very revolutionary method in language teaching as it considered communication as the center of the language classroom experience. More recently task-based language teaching takes "tasks" as the key unit for this method in designing and implementing language instruction.

Language teachers have always been interested in finding innovative and more effective ways to teach languages. In order to provide teachers with effective options for language instruction, we should consider carefully what we know about how a language is acquired. An effective approach to language instruction must be one based on and informed by theory and empirical evidence in how people learn a language. Although research in second language acquisition mainly focuses on learners and learning, the findings from this research have very often implications for language instructors and instruction.

Language teachers should not look at the 'right method' to teach languages, as there is not one. They should instead refer to a principled and evidence-based approach to language teaching. One that can be drawn from key facts end evidence from second language acquisition theory and research (Benati, 2020; Long, 2017; Schwieter & Benati, 2019).

Second language acquisition: Key facts

Theory and research in second language acquisition have emphasized the complexity of acquisition processes. How learners process language, how they intake it and the new language system develops, and how they access the information to communicate are key areas of research in this field of enquiry.

Key fact 1: Second language acquisition is primarily a matter of developing implicit knowledge

The bulk of second language acquisition is largely implicit. A number of scholars in the field (Krashen, 1982; Ellis 2012; VanPatten, 2010, 2016; VanPatten, Smith & Benati, 2019) have argued that second language acquisition is the result of an interaction (outside awareness) between several factors: input data; universal properties; first language properties. This view does not imply that all learners do not engage in explicit learning as they obviously do. However, there is no clear evidence that explicit learning turns into implicit in second language acquisition (VanPatten & Benati, 2015).

Key fact 2: Language is a complex, abstract and a mental phenomenon

Explicit knowledge of language is defined as conscious knowledge. It is often verbalizable knowledge about language such as to talk about someone else in the past, you add –*ed*- to the stem at the end of the verb. Implicit knowledge is defined as unconscious knowledge and it is not verbalizable. There is no evidence that explicit knowledge turns into implicit knowledge. The acquisition of grammatical properties is implicit. Language is too abstract and complex to be taught and learnt explicitly. L2 learners create linguistic systems in an organized way that seem little affected by external forces such as instruction and correction. In short, language is not the rules and paradigms that appear on textbook pages. Explicit rules and paradigm lists cannot

become the abstract and complex system because the two things are completely different. What winds up in the human mind has no resemblance to anything on textbook pages or what teachers might say (VanPatten, Smith & Benati, 2019). This implication stems from the fact that there are no internal mechanisms that can convert explicit textbook rules into implicit mental representation.

Language is special and it is not learned in the same way as other complex mental phenomena. Humans are hardwired to learn language and have special cognitive mechanisms specifically designed to deal with language. Language is abstract and complex and should not be taught and learned explicitly. There is no mechanism that turns explicit rules into the abstract and complex mental representation we call 'language' (VanPatten & Rothman, 2014).

Key fact 3: L2 learners process linguistic features following a natural order and a specific sequence. Instruction has a limited role.

Language development is slow and piecemeal (VanPatten, 2003). L2 learners do not acquire one thing and then move on to another, as suggested by typical syllabi and textbooks. L2 learners' minds are constantly working on various aspects of language simultaneously. Only over time does the internal system build up and begin to resemble the second language. Language development is stage-like and ordered-like (e.g., acquisition of morphemes). In the acquisition of structure there are stages that all learners go through regardless of their L1. There is no evidence that stages can be skipped or orders can be altered (Pienemman & Lenzing, 2015)

Key fact 4: Instruction has a limited role

Overall, the role of instruction in language acquisition is limited and constrained by a number of factors (e.g., orders and sequences of development, processing constraints). However, despite the fact that instruction is, for instance, not able to alter the route of acquisition, it might have some beneficial effects in terms of speeding up the rate of language acquisition. The question is how. If we are going to focus on form in any way in the classroom, it ought to be input based and meaning oriented. Instruction as input manipulation might or might not facilitate language processing. The empirical research measuring the effects of instruction is wobbly; that is, the results of the research are not always clear. One of the problems with the research is the way scholars measure outcomes of pedagogical interventions. Just how do we know acquisition has happened after an intervention? Some scholars have argued that there is a huge bias toward explicit testing and tapping of explicit knowledge in the research on the role of instruction. What is more, given what we know about the slow and piecemeal nature of acquisition, it is hardly probable that instruction causes instantaneous acquisition of a particular property of language (VanPatten, Smith & Benati, 2019).

Key fact 5: L2 learners require extensive input exposure to build their internal language systems

Input provides the primary linguistic data that the internal language system needs to make acquisition of a language possible (Gass & Mackey, 2002). Input is the main ingredient in second language acquisition, but acquisition cannot happen unless the input is processed. To be processed successfully it must be comprehensible and it must carry a message. Learners' internal mechanisms cannot use data that is not message oriented. L2 learners primarily focus on meaning when they process elements of the new language. Acquisition requires individuals to establish relations between a particular form and its meaning/s (VanPatten, 2015).

L2 learners should be exposed to comprehensible and meaningful input to increase the amount and quality of the input they can intake and to ensure that they can make connections between meanings and the forms. Interactions are crucial for language development. Interaction modifications make input more comprehensible and comprehensible input in turn promotes acquisition. What emerges from second language theory and research evidence is a model of acquisition that goes from input to output. Input is not processed in its entirety and it is reduced (intake) due to a number of processing and linguistic constraints. L2 learners have access to the new language system to produce the language (output) but this access is also constrained by processability problems. On the whole, input is an absolutely necessary element for acquisition and there is no theory, view, or hypothesis in second language acquisition theory and research that does not recognize the importance of input.

Second language instruction: Key implications

Based on the theory and research in second language acquisition, there are a number of implications for language instruction.

Key implication 1: Input must be comprehensible and meaningful

What is input in the context of acquiring languages? Input is the language that L2 learners hear or see in a communicative context. Input is language that learners try to comprehend for the message contained in it. When somebody asks 'Where are you from?' we focus on what (input) the person is asking us. We respond focusing on the meaning contained in what this person is asking us. In contrast we can hear a teacher asking us or the entire classroom to repeat something or explain something (e.g., grammatical feature). In this case, our task would simply be to repeat or memorize language. It could certainly be the case that we can repeat without knowing what our teacher actually is saying. Therefore, we could potentially perform the activity without fully understanding its meaning.

It is important to reiterate here that input for acquisition is the language that is embedded in a communicative context that learners attend to for its meaning (VanPatten, 2003). L2 learners acquire language mainly through exposure to comprehensible input, in a similar fashion as they acquire their first language. The input that L2 learners receive should be therefore simplified with the use of contextual and extra linguistics clues. Language learners should be provided with opportunities to focus on meaning rather than grammatical forms for example. Simplified input is language input that is easy to process. Teachers can for example use high-frequency vocabulary. They can also make use of gestures, pictures or drawings to make input simpler and easier to comprehend. The use of short sentences can also reduce the burden of processing and increase comprehension.

Good input language for learning is not the explanation about grammar, presentation of vocabulary followed by mechanical practice. Good input language is about creating opportunities for language learners to hear or read language in a communicative context that they need to process for meaning. Engaging language learners in communication means creating opportunities for them to interpret, negotiate and express meaning in a specific context. Language instruction should focus on providing learners with a rich variety of comprehensible input and opportunities to use language spontaneously and meaningfully. Interaction offers opportunities for negotiation of meaning and language acquisition. Quality classroom input must have two characteristics: It needs to be at an appropriate level; and learners should be engaged with the input (they interact with it).

L2 learners acquire language mainly through comprehension but they do not simply absorb everything they hear or read. They cannot attach meaning to the language input they are exposed to during comprehension. Their language systems process, organize, and store linguistic data continuously interacting with language input. To make its way through the system, that input must be simplified input. There are four main features which should be considered to make input language easy to understand and process: short sentences; slower rate; rephrasing; and clear content. L2 learners are mapping overall meaning into strings of words they hear or read. The content is clear as instructors use linguistic and non-linguistic means to make input comprehensible (pictures, cartoons, gestures).

Although exposure to input is necessary and vital for second language acquisition, mere exposure to input might not be sufficient and sometimes input might need to be enhanced via some kind of formal instruction. Input can be enhanced so as to increase the possibility that L2 learners might notice particular forms in the input they are exposed to. Textual enhancement is an instructional intervention carried out to enhance the saliency of input in written or oral texts with a view to facilitating learners' noticing of targeted forms and thereby enhancing their acquisition (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Textual enhancement makes use of typographical cues (e.g., boldfacing, italicizing, underlining, colouring, enlarging the font size, etc.) to draw learners' attention to particular forms in a text. Overall, research on input and textual enhancement has indicated that it is an effective input manipulation pedagogical intervention to increase frequency about a target form in the input and foster noticing.

Input can be restructured so that form-meaning connections can be facilitated. Processing instruction (Benati, 2019: VanPatten, 2015) is a pedagogical intervention to grammar instruction that exposes L2 learners to a particular type of input which help L2 leaners to make correct form-meaning connections or parse sentences appropriately (compute basic structure in real time) during comprehension. Processing instruction relies on structured input tasks to push learners away from inefficient processing strategies so that they are more likely to process the relevant forms in the input.

Interactional input (Long, 2007) refers to input received during interaction where there is some kind of communicative exchange involving the learner and at least another person (e.g., conversation, classroom interactions). In these exchanges, L2 learners negotiate meaning and make some conversational adjustments. This means that conversation and interaction may make linguistic features salient to the learner and the process of negotiating meaning can facilitate acquisition. Learners sometimes request clarifications or repetitions if they do not understand the input they receive. In the attempt to facilitate communication, one person can request the other to modify his/her utterances or the person modifies his/her own utterances to be understood. This kind of negotiation of meaning may trigger interactional adjustments by the native speaker (NS) or more competent interlocutor. Negotiation of meaning (Mackey & Philip, 1998) may facilitate language acquisition because it connects input, learner-internal capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways. Research into the relative effectiveness of modified input on acquisition has shown it might have an impact on learners' ability to negotiate the input they need at a particular stage of development.

Corrective feedback can provide learners with additional input and indicate that utterances are not target-like. This can take several forms in conversational interaction, such as puzzled looks, confirmation checks, clarifications requests, and corrective recasts. Recast is where learners are provided with a correct form in the input. The interlocutor will reformulate a learner's non-target-like utterance so that it is target-like in the hopes that the learner becomes aware that something is wrong in their output. Research on the effects of recasts has provided mixed results. Some researchers (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Ranta & Lyster, 2017) have argued that corrective feedback is

more effective when L2 learners are given opportunities to interact, negotiate meaning and self-repair.

Key implication 2: Communication should be fostered

Communication cannot be equated with the Q/A paradigm, use of role plays or open-ended questions type of language practice. Communication can be defined as the expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning for a specific purpose in a given context. We know that interaction promotes comprehension and comprehension promotes acquisition. Communicative tasks promote acquisition and provide a purpose for language use. A task (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004) can be used to achieve a specific lesson objective. Tasks (and not exercises or activities) should form the backbone of the curriculum. A definition and understanding of the nature of communication is crucial for developing effective communicative skills. Communication can be defined as the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning for a specific purpose in a given context. Language learners must be engaged in communicative tasks where they use language that is meaningful. All communicative tasks must ensure language learners develop their ability to share information, negotiate meaning and interact with others. Speaking tasks must be developed with the intention to promote communication and communicative language use. A communication task is a classroom activity that has (a) an objective attainable only by interaction among participants; (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction; and (c) a focus on meaning exchange.

A communication task is a learning endeavor that requires L2 learners to comprehend, negotiate, manipulate and produce the target language as they need to perform some set of work-plans. L2 Learners must develop their ability to manage interaction as well as engage in the negotiation of meaning. The management of the interaction involves such things as when and how to take the floor, when to introduce a topic or change the subject, how to invite someone else to speak, how to keep a conversation going and so on. Negotiation of meaning refers to the skill of making sure the person you are speaking to has correctly understood you and that you have correctly understood them (Lee, 2000).

Assuming that our aim is to develop language learners' communicative competence, we must create classroom oral tasks that stimulate communication in the language classroom. In addition to that, we must consider practical needs and possible constraints in developing effective oral tasks.

Much of the time allocated to the oral task must be occupied by language learners' talk and not instructors' talk. Classroom discussion must not be dominated by a minority of talkative participants and all learners must contribute evenly (even in the case of a mixed-ability class). Oral tasks should be developed keeping language learners' motivation in mind as learners are eager to speak when they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it. Language learners need to use an appropriate, comprehensible and accurate level of target language. Language instructors must address some of the problems related to getting language learners to talk in the classroom.

Key implication 3: Learners should be exposed to meaningful and interactive tasks

A task is a language-learning endeavor that requires students to (a) comprehend, (b) manipulate and (c) produce the target language as they perform some set of work plans. Tasks provide learners with a purpose for language use and make language teaching more communicative (Lee, 2000). Tasks are activities which involve understanding and processing of the target language.

If a language task follows the above criteria and it is structured in an appropriate way it can successfully promote communication among L2 learners. Tasks promote communication but the question is whether they also have a beneficial role for second language acquisition. It can be argued that it can facilitate language acquisition processes in a number of ways.

Firstly, in interactive tasks, language learners receive and are exposed to meaningful input from a variety of sources: teachers; other learners; and the task itself. More importantly the input, both aural and written, is made comprehensible and meaningful. The input language learners are exposed to is simplified (e.g., short utterances, forms are made salient, the language is simplified). These modifications help language learners to process the language and they increase the changes for the development of their internal language developing system.

Secondly, in interactive tasks, language learners are not engaged in mechanical output practice (e.g., drills, repetition exercises) where the language they produce is not meaningful. Interactive tasks would instead allow language learners to engage in meaningful production of language which might help them in filling the gaps in their knowledge (forms, words and structures to convey meaning) and facilitating language acquisition.

Thirdly, in interactive tasks the focus is not just expression and interpretation of meaning but also negotiation of meaning. Providing language learners with opportunities to negotiate meaning (e.g. confirmation checks) would increase the amount of language input that it is comprehended and therefore it would facilitate learning. Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. All communicative tasks must ensure L2 learners develop their ability to share information, negotiate meaning and interact with others. Speaking tasks must be developed with the intention to promote communication and communicative language use.

Fourthly, L2 learners should be provided with opportunities for output practice. They should be exposed to tasks that encourage interaction and negotiation of meaning. Language teaching must create opportunities for L2 learners to communicate by performing communicative functions (output). Whenever L2 learners produce language, it should be for the purpose of expressing some kind of meaning. L2 learners should engage in speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities through the completion of communicative tasks that promote interpretation, interaction, negotiation of meaning (nature of communication), and meaningful language production.

Fifthly, language teachers should use a more learner-centered teaching approach as opposed to a teacher-centered approach. They must consider the use of corrective feedback in the form of recast and other forms of feedback ensuring that the amount of error correction is kept to a minimum, and learners are encouraged to self-repair.

Language instructors are encouraged to take suggestions from here and there when it comes to pedagogical issues, as long as what they choose is guided and informed by theory and empirical research in language learning and teaching. We argue for a learner-centered type of instruction, where L2 learners engage in communicative and effective tasks which involve group work and interaction with other learners. A teaching environment in which learners are exposed to tasks for a specific purpose and where the instructor is in the position to give the students many opportunities for spontaneous production, interaction and negotiation of meaning should be achieved. A different role for the language instructor has been proposed, one that creates the opportunity and the conditions in the classroom for L2 learners to co-participate and take responsibility for their learning. In this new environment learning can take place naturally and teaching can be effective. In this teaching and learning environment, meaning is emphasized over

form, the amount of correction is kept to a minimum, letting the students express themselves and self-repair. Comprehensible, simplified and message-based input is provided through the use of contextual props, cues, and gestures rather than structural grading. Tasks should promote genuine communication which involves the ability to interpret, express and negotiate meaning. Learners should engage with language tasks where meaning is emphasized over form. However, a focus on form is an essential component in second language teaching and learning.

Key implication 4: Focus on form should move from input to output

As the research on the above points emerged, scholars began to ask, "Can instruction influence acquisition? What role does instruction play in these observations?" This research has led us to three more basic facts (Benati, 2021: Wong & Simard, 2018).

- *Instruction does not affect the stage-like or ordered nature of acquisition.* That is, instruction does not allow learners to skip stages or alter ordered acquisition.

- *There are internal constraints on acquisition.* Something inside the learner's mind/brain processes and organizes language in ways that cannot be manipulated by outside forces such as instruction and practice.

- *Input provides the data for acquisition.* Language that learners hear and see in communicative contexts forms the data on which the internal mechanisms operate.

A specific traditional grammar-oriented approach is the so-called PPP (presentation- practice-production). This approach proposes a three-stage model. The first stage consists of the internalization of a new form or structure which is usually presented through a text. The second stage implies the practice of the new form of structure through its systematic use. In the final stage activities are organized involving personal use of the target form or structure. The PPP suggests the use of activities which allow the learner to move from systematic to appropriate use of the language in contexts. It is only when learners have mastered the form that they will be able to use it in context where the message becomes more important than the medium.

A traditional grammar-oriented approach is often characterized by paradigmatic explanations of specific linguistic forms or structures. The paradigmatic explanation is followed by pattern practice and substitution drills. In this type of mechanical practice, real life situations are completely ignored and practice is implemented in a completely decontextualized way.

Drills are problematic for two main reasons:

(a) They force L2 learners to produce grammatical forms before they are capable of comprehending the forms, which leads to incorrect generalizations and overuse of the form when not necessary. Learners need the opportunity to comprehend language before being able to use it accurately.

(b) They do not allow learners to make form-meaning connections in comprehension and production. The idea that acquiring grammar can be simply achieved by learning about the grammatical rules of a target language and practice those rules through production tasks (very often mechanical and traditional) has been challenged by many scholars in the field of second language acquisition and language teaching. In recent years, findings from empirical research in instructed second language acquisition and theory have demonstrated that a component of focus on grammar ('focus on form') might facilitate acquisition if it is provided in combination with a focus on meaning. The term 'focus on form' is characterized by any pedagogical interventions

which draws leaners' attention to the grammatical properties of the target language by providing a focus on meaning and a focus on form.

Input plays a key role in second language acquisition. Input is the single most important concept in second language acquisition. Considering the limited role for instruction, and the importance of incorporating grammar in a more communicative framework of language teaching, teachers should look at devising grammar tasks that, on one hand, enhance the grammatical features in the input, and on the other hand, provide L2 learners with opportunities to focus on meaning. The question is to determine what type of grammar is more successful in terms of helping learners internalize the grammatical features of a target language.

The following principles should be considered in approaching grammar instruction:

Instruction might have a facilitative role in terms of helping L2 learners to process the linguistics features of the target language in the input. Input manipulation and pedagogical interventions such as textual enhancement might provide an effective focus on form;

Instruction might also have a facilitative role in helping L2 learners to process language accurately and appropriately by, for instance, making form and form-meaning connections in the input. L2 Learners, through structured input activities, might be able to connect particular meanings to particular forms (grammatical or lexical). For example, they tend to connect a form with its meaning in the input they receive (the morpheme *-ed-* on the end of a verb in English refers to an event in the past);

Instruction might have a facilitative role if it follows the natural of acquisition. Pedagogical interventions to grammar instruction should move from input to output. Input-oriented pedagogical interventions such as input flood, textual enhancement or/and structured input practice should precede structured output in order for instruction to have an effect in both processing and eventually the ability for L2 learners to tap into their developing system and produce the target form.

Takeaways for an approach to language instruction

Input matters in second language acquisition as it plays an essential role. It should play a central role in the classroom, and not be something added on. The type of input that matters must be simplified, comprehensible, message-oriented and level-appropriate.

Communication cannot be equated with questions and answers (Q/A) practice. Communication is the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning for a specific purpose in a given context. Interaction fosters acquisition when a communication problem arises and language learners are engaged in resolving it through interaction and negotiation of meaning.

Tasks promote acquisition and provide a purpose for language use. A communication task is a learning endeavor that requires L2 learners to comprehend, negotiate, manipulate and produce the target language as they need to perform some set of work-plans. Information exchange tasks are a good example of interactive communication tasks and should substitute traditional oral practice. A task is designed for the purposes of increasing learning, exposing learners to meaningful input.

In terms of formal instruction, structured input practice helps learners to process input correctly and efficiently and therefore increases learner's intake. Input enhancement techniques provide foreign language learners with access to comprehensible input, positive evidence and help learners to pay attention to grammatical forms in the input. Collaborative output tasks are useful tasks as they provide learners with an opportunity to produce output, promote negotiation of form and at the same time develop learners' linguistic skills. Grammar tasks should be developed to ensure that learners process input correctly and efficiently. They should be designed for learners to notice and process forms in the input and eventually make correct form-mapping connections. Grammar tasks must move from input to output practice.

It is envisaged that an effective approach to language instruction is one based and informed by theory and appropriate empirical evidence in second language acquisition (Benati, 2020).

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