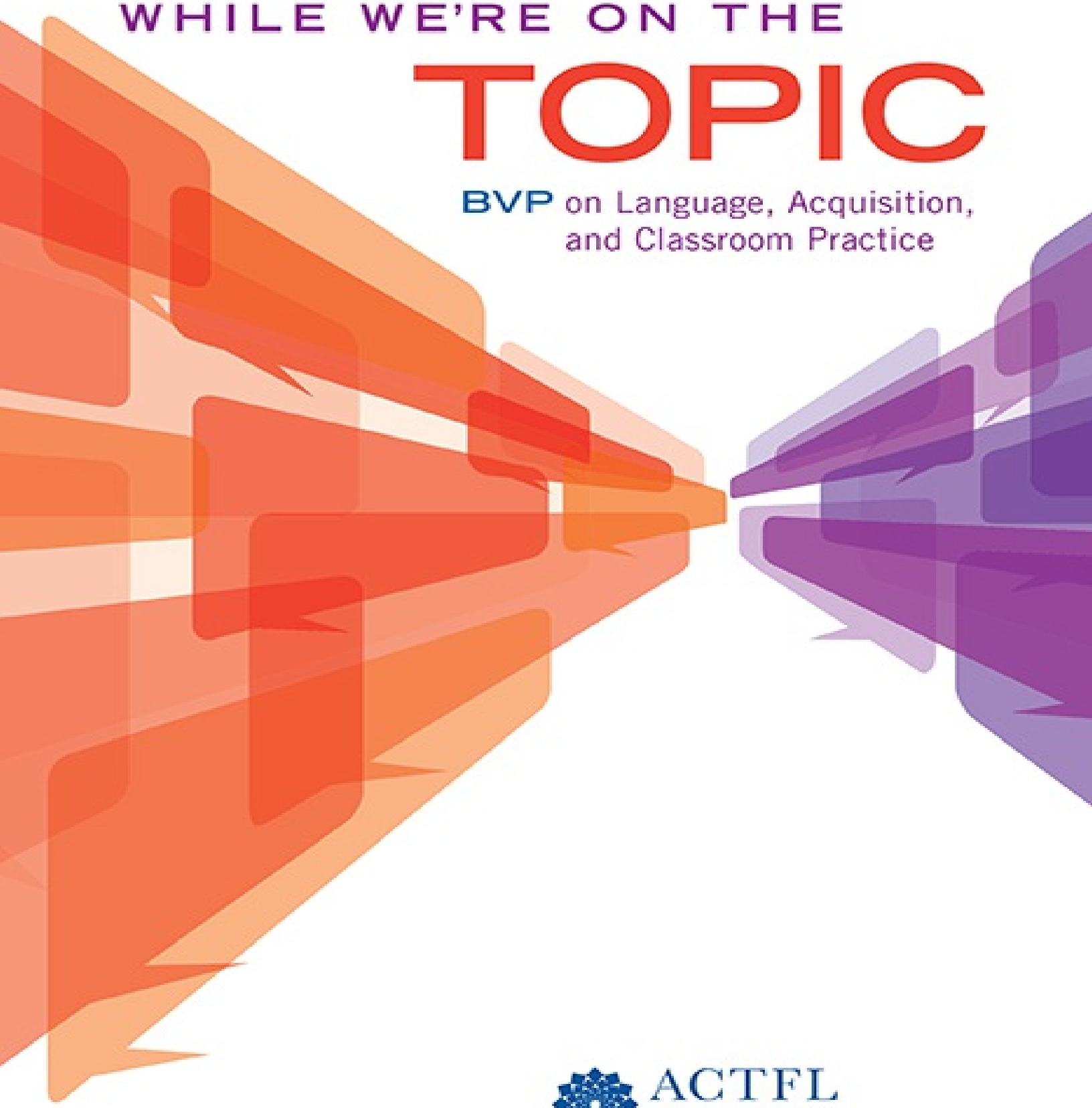
Bill VanPatten

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC

BVP on Language, Acquisition, and Classroom Practice



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Acknowledgments

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Finally, my thanks to all of my students—undergrads and graduates— who have pushed me to hone ideas and present them in a distilled yet fun way over the years. This is a great profession!

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Prologue

This is not your typical text on language teaching—and you'll see why as you begin to engage the topics. This book aims to bring certain basic ideas back into focus for both novice instructors and veterans.

I want to start by talking about the nature of contemporary language teaching. Just what is it? The answer depends on who you talk to. Here I want to suggest something to you, the reader: Contemporary language teaching is communicative language teaching, and communicative language teaching is contemporary language teaching.

Yet communicative language teaching has a bad rap in the profession. Why? Largely because many people never quite understood its underlying tenets. Perhaps they were never made clear. For whatever reason, communicative language teaching became a buzzword everyone thought they understood but maybe really didn't. The outcome: communicative language teaching became whatever people wanted it to be.

But easily articulated principles do underlie communicative/contemporary language teaching. And—traditional approaches aside—I would argue that proficiency-based language teaching, TPRS, The Natural Approach, immersion and content language teaching, among others, are all examples of communicative language teaching. Why? Because they are all driven by the same underlying principles—at least, presumably so.

So, to repeat, I start with the premise that contemporary language teaching (CLT) is communicative language teaching (CLT) in one form or another. That is, CLT = CLT. Furthermore, there is no singular way to do CLT. Hearing people say "the" communicative method or "the" communicative approach (as opposed to "a" communicative method/approach) is like hearing "The Star Spangled Banner" sung off-key: it doesn't sound pretty on the ears—at least not on mine. I react negatively, because saying "the" communicative method demonstrates how people simply misunderstand the most important and insightful revolution in language teaching. Hopefully this book will help to clarify why.

My intent, then, is to cover the basics and review the underlying principles for CLT so that, no matter what approach an instructor adopts—or even if an instructor fashions a unique curriculum, a "personal method"—that approach is not put together based on myth or popular perception. Instead, I hope teachers will make curricular decisions based on ideas informed by theory and research. But that doesn't mean you have a dense, theory-laden, research-heavy tome in your hands—just look at how brief this book is. My goal is to make an informed approach to CLT fun to read.

Now it's time for the sneak peek: What are the principles underlying CLT? It is arguable (somewhat) what the list should be, but we have to start somewhere. And so, for better or for worse, I will present the basics in a series of six major principles for CLT:

1. *If you teach communicatively, you'd better have a working definition of communication*. My argument for this is that you cannot evaluate what is communicative and what is appropriate for the classroom unless you have such a definition.
2. *Language is too abstract and complex to teach and learn explicitly.* That is, language must be handled in the classroom differently from other subject matter (e.g., history, science, sociology) if the goal is communicative ability. This has profound consequences for how we organize language-teaching materials and approach the classroom.
3. *Acquisition is severely constrained by internal (and external) factors.* Many teachers labor under the old present + practice + test model. But the research is clear on how acquisition happens. So, understanding something about acquisition pushes the teacher to question the prevailing model of language instruction.
4. *Instructors and materials should provide student learners with level-appropriate input and interaction.* This principle falls out of the previous one. Since the role of input often gets lip service in language teaching, I hope to give the reader some ideas about moving input from "technique" to the center of the curriculum.
5. *Tasks (and not Exercises or Activities) should form the backbone of the curriculum.* Again, language teaching is dominated by the present + practice + test model. One reason is that teachers do not understand what their options are, what is truly "communicative" in terms of activities in class, and how to alternatively assess. So, this principle is crucial for teachers to move toward contemporary language instruction.
6. *A focus on form should be input-oriented and meaning-based.* Teachers are overly preoccupied with teaching and testing grammar. So are textbooks. Students are thus overly preoccupied with the learning of grammar. This principle demonstrates what *should* be the proper approach to drawing learners' attention to grammatical features in the contemporary classroom.

Again, to be sure, these are principles I have selected for this book. Why these and not others? My reasoning is twofold:

1. My experience over the years suggests that without these six principles, no real change can happen. These are the "basics of the basics."
2. I believe a book on language teaching should be short and to the point. Sometimes less is more. Imagine the instructor-in-training getting out of a course on language teaching with six basic ideas under her belt that she is ready to use to develop and evaluate language teaching—six ideas she knows well and will carry with her. These basics will let her better understand standards, guidelines, and anything else thrown at her. Again, sometimes less is more.

The audience for this book is wide-ranging, but importantly, you don't have to be a scholar in language teaching or language acquisition to read it. As I started writing, I had in mind two groups of people as readers. The first group was teachers-in-training. My idea was that this book could be used in a class as either a main text or as a supplement. I have used the manuscript as the principal text in my own Foundations of Contemporary Language Teaching (CLT) course. For this reason, included along the way are lists of foundational readings, discussion questions and food for thought, as well as "I…" statements at the end of each chapter so readers can reflect on what they now know and can talk about.

The second group I had in mind as readers were teachers already in the field. Maybe they took courses on language teaching a long time ago, or maybe recently, but in those courses they didn't review the basics this book contains. Or maybe those teachers want to brush up, to see if anything in this book is new to the language-teaching field. No matter who reads this book and for what purpose, I have deliberately kept the style light and conversational. This is not your conventional book, nor should you expect a high-falutin' scholarly text with lots of citations, long sentences, and the like. In this book I want to talk directly and simply about the topics, and I want you, the reader, to enjoy yourself as much as possible as you turn the pages. Hopefully, you will.

So, with this prologue done, I invite you to plunge into the basics for the first time, or perhaps once again. I offer only one point of caution: Many readers may attribute all of the ideas to me. The truth is, I am distilling ideas from the field and adding my twist here and there. No single person invented contemporary-language teaching—there is accumulated knowledge out there. So don't think that, just because I am not following scholarly convention, the ideas are all mine. Where I deem necessary, I have made references to particular people, and in the **Foundational Readings** at the end of each chapter you can find sources that have either informed that chapter's ideas or that contain accepted ideas in the field. Thus, if you ever cite anything from this text, it's better to say, "VanPatten interprets X to mean…" rather than "VanPatten says that…" But it's actually better if you go to original sources and cite those. This book is meant to introduce you to concepts (or invite you to review them) and to whet your appetite about the basics of contemporary language teaching. The foundational readings are there to get you started on more reading if you have the time and inclination.

OK. So now the prologue is *really* done. Happy reading!

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East Lansing, Michigan
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Wait! Before You Begin Reading…

Very much in vogue these days—and very useful!—are what we call “I…” statements. These are statements that begin with “I can…” or “I know…”, for example, to allow a person to self-assess ability in or knowledge of something. A good idea, then, before beginning this book is to take a short twenty-item “I….” self-assessment. Another good idea is to come back to the “I…” statements after you have finished reading this book and see if there are any changes in how you would respond. If you’re ready, go ahead.

For each statement below, indicate which of the three options best applies to you right now.

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I can offer a working definition of communication.	○	○	○
2. I can describe the two major purposes of communication.	○	○	○
3. I understand how the classroom is a "limited context" environment for communication.	○	○	○
4. I can describe/explain how knowledge about communication informs choices and behaviors in terms of language teaching.	○	○	○
5. I understand what it means for language to be abstract.	○	○	○
6. I understand what it means for language to be complex.	○	○	○
7. I understand the sentence "What's on page 32 of the textbook is not what winds up in your head."	○	○	○
8. I can list the basic characteristics of language acquisition.	○	○	○
9. I understand that instruction cannot alter acquisition processes.	○	○	○
10. I can offer examples of linguistic development in learners over time.	○	○	○
11. I can offer a definition of "input" and give examples.	○	○	○
12. I can describe how to make input comprehensible.	○	○	○
13. I understand that input is not a technique, but is foundational to the communicative curriculum.	○	○	○
14. I understand the difference between talking "at" and talking "with" learners.	○	○	○
15. I can state the difference between an Exercise, an Activity, and a Task.	○	○	○
16. I understand the difference between an input-oriented Task and an output-oriented Task.	○	○	○
17. I understand why the profession has moved away from grammar teaching to input enhancement and focus on form.	○	○	○
18. I can explain the difference between teaching grammar and input enhancement.	○	○	○
19. I can describe at least two of the input enhancement/focus on form techniques widely used in language teaching.	○	○	○

CLT PRINCIPLE

Teaching Communicatively Implies a Definition of *Communication*

Before you begin this chapter, read the statements below. At the end of the chapter you will be asked to go over these statements again to make sure you have absorbed the material.

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I can offer a working definition of communication.	○	○	○
2. I can describe the two major purposes of communication.	○	○	○
3. I understand how the classroom is a "limited context" environment for communication.	○	○	○
4. I can describe/explain how knowledge about communication informs choices and behaviors in terms of language teaching.	○	○	○

The principle at the center of this chapter concerns the nature of communication:

Teaching communicatively implies a definition of communication. This definition in turn will inform the decisions one makes about the curriculum and the classroom.

In this chapter we will explore these points:

- *A definition of communication.*
- *How context determines a good deal of the kind of communication that can happen in classrooms.*
- *Implications of the definition for language teaching.*

What better way to start a discussion about contemporary communicative language

teaching than by talking about communication? Let's begin with something my former colleague, Sandra Savignon—the pioneer of communicative language teaching in the United States once said: "Collecting definitions of communication is fun."

I'm not sure if it's fun, but it's very interesting. Whenever I give talks about communicative language teaching, I often ask the audience to work in small groups and to define communication by completing this sentence: "Communication is…" It is fascinating to see an audience of language teachers, many of whom claim to teach communicatively, struggle to come up with a definition. Why is this fascinating? Because, before I ask for a definition, I ask the audience members to raise their hands if they teach communicatively or know about communicative language teaching. Almost everyone raises a hand. Yet they struggle with a definition of the very thing that presumably informs what they do in the classroom.

In other words, what does communicative language teaching mean to these teachers if they don't have a definition of communication at hand? (By the way, have you stopped at this point to see if *you* can offer a definition of communication, and, if so, what that definition looks like?)

What I have come to understand is that many people believe communicative language teaching is anything that isn't "teaching grammar the old-fashioned way." This may be true sometimes, but not always. In fact, it may not be true at all. Just because a person doesn't teach "grammar the old-fashioned way" doesn't necessarily mean that person has a communicative classroom or the class activities are communicative. Why would I make this assertion? Let's look at a different situation to understand this claim.

Imagine you see a sign that says, "Come in. Enjoy our hospitality." You enter the establishment, and someone greets you, but without a smile. Is that person being hospitable? If you say, "No, a hospitable reception would include smiling and exuding some enthusiasm," you would be right, because the term "hospitality" means "a friendly and generous reception." You are expecting particular behaviors because of that term's definition. You remark to that person that he or she is not being hospitable, that a smile and "Welcome, welcome. We're so glad you could join us today," would be more appropriate. That person responds, "Well, I *am* being hospitable. I mean, at least I'm not being nasty." Would you accept "not nasty" as the definition of "hospitable"? Probably not. A person could be "not nasty" and still be cold, or not particularly inviting. The point here is: a definition of "hospitable" is not a definition of what it isn't, but a definition of what it *is*.

The same holds true for teaching communicatively. To teach communicatively means instructors have a working definition of communication that informs and inspires what they do. We can't define "communicative" by "what 'communicative' isn't." So we will start with a working definition of what "communicative" *is*.

The Nature of Communication

The definition of communication we will use here dates to work by Sandra J. Savignon in

the 1970s. We will tweak it somewhat to emphasize some things that are pertinent to classrooms. The definition is this:

Communication is the expression, interpretation, and sometimes negotiation of meaning in a given context. What is more, communication is also purposeful.

Sounds simple, right? It is—but deceptively so, as we will see. Let's break the definition down before exploring any implications for language teaching.

- **Meaning.** This construct refers to the information contained in some kind of a message. For example, if someone says, "It's two o'clock" the literal message is that it's two hours past noon. But meaning can also refer to a speaker's intent. Maybe the person who says "It's two o'clock" is worried that someone else is taking too long to get ready or is unaware of the time. In this case, not only is this message about the actual time, but it also conveys the message, "We're gonna be late if you don't hurry up." So, meaning can be layered. There can be the overt or literal meaning, and then there might also be "hidden" meaning, or something the expresser means if we "read between the lines."

- **Expression.** This term refers to any entity's production during a communicative event. For example, someone could say, "Happy to see you!" Someone could text, "Can't wait to c u!" with three smiley faces. Someone could sign in non-oral language, "I'm happy you're here!" And, yes, a dog could wag its tail to let you know, "I'm glad you're home!" All of these exemplify that the expression of meaning need not be oral—or it not need be oral alone. As with a dog, some-times the expression of meaning is visual (tail wag, a scratch at the door, a lowered head). Even people express meaning without language (raising eyebrows, smiling, waving, eyes narrowing). In face-to-face interactions, people tend to use both oral and non-oral expression of meaning. I might say, "She said *what* about me?" with an incredulous look on my face that drives home my surprise or astonishment. For this reason, expert card players are said to have a "poker face"—they do very well at not communicating what's in their hands via facial gestures or body posture.

- **Interpretation.** Communication is not one-sided. Expression of meaning is communicative only if someone or some other entity is expecting to understand the message or intent. A person doesn't say "Happy to see you!" to no one in the room (unless she's an actor practicing a line, but that's not communication). Nor does a dog wag a tail to himself; he wags it for his owner to see how happy he is—or to another dog to signal the same. So at least one other entity must always be there to comprehend and interpret the message and intent of the expresser. Even if you write in a diary to yourself, you are doing something you expect yourself to read or maybe have people read upon

your death.

- **Negotiation.** Communication is not always successful. Or it may be partially successful. If someone says, "Communication is complex," a response might be, "What does that mean?" The person responds with a question because of inability to grasp the expresser's message or intent (i.e., "What does she mean by 'complex'?"). So now the ball is in the communicative court of the expresser to elaborate. He's one more example.

BRUTUS: "So, let's double down."
MURPHY: "Devil down?"
BRUTUS: "No. *Double* down. You know, make the point even stronger, and not give in."
MURPHY: "Oh. I'd never heard that expression before."

In this sequence, Murphy thought he heard "devil," and a sequence of correcting the misinterpretation ensues.

Negotiation happens all the time, especially between types of people who may not communicate in the same way. Deborah Tannen's best-selling book *That's Not What I Meant* concerns communication between men and women, highlighting how often the two genders don't communicate in the same way. Men and women may "misread" each other during communication, not because of what is said, but because of *how* it is said. César Millán, the Dog Whisperer, has made a name for himself (if not a fortune) showing how people can effectively interpret and negotiate meaning with their canine companions.

Negotiation shows up in a myriad of ways. Here are some:

Statement: "I'm sorry, but I don't get what you're saying." "Say that again, please."
Comprehension check: "You know what I'm saying?"
Confirmation check: "Let me see if I got this right. You're saying that…"
Gesture or look: I spread my hands out with a look on my face that says, "Huh?"

All of these reactions and others are ways in which interlocutors initiate meaning checks, which can then lead to negotiation.

- **Context.** The construct of "context" refers to two principal aspects of communication: the setting and the participants. We will review this in detail shortly.

- **Purpose.** People always speak, write, listen, or read with a purpose. Just because someone's lips are moving or their hands are gesturing doesn't mean they're communicating. If what they're doing doesn't have a communicative purpose, then there is no communication. As with the construct *context*, we will elaborate on *purpose* shortly.

At the beginning of this chapter, did you think communication was something as simple as "exchanging ideas"? Or maybe "meaningful expression"? These are the typical definitions I hear when I ask this question to a large group. And, more often than not, teachers define communicative language teaching as "getting students to talk all the time." But, as we have seen, communication does not imply any of these ideas by themselves. To see how communication is even more complex than we have observed, let's look at the two aspects of communication we have yet to elaborate on: context and purpose.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Why do most people, teachers included, consider communication to be a one-way event (i.e., "getting your meaning across")? It has been my experience that most people fail to see communication as an interactive, dynamic process. Yet, at the same time, we *intuitively* know that communication is not in the hands of one person. Try this out: next time someone is talking to you, play with your body posture or gestures while listening. What does this do to the other person? Does it show how he or she is monitoring *your interpretation* of the message?

Context

Context is a powerful dimension of any communicative event. Referring to *physical setting and participants*, context constrains how people communicate. For instance, being in a classroom is not the same thing as being at a dinner table at home. Interacting with your doctor is not the same as interacting with your twin, your parents, or your romantic partner. **As context shifts, so does the nature of communication.**

For example, let's look at three different contexts in which "Jake," a fictitious 19-year old university student, participates. Although Jake is a constant in each context, the setting and the other participants change.

[with his best friend at lunch at Chipotle, post E. coli scare, to be sure]

JAKE: Here's a question only you can answer.

FRIEND: OK. Shoot.

[in his political science class]

JAKE: [raising his hand] Professor. I have a question.

PROF: Sure, Jake. What is it?

[at home with his romantic partner, watching a Netflix movie]

JAKE: [leaning in, almost whispering] I have to ask you something…

PARTNER: Hmmm?

> **"Context is a powerful dimension of any communicative event. Context constrains how people communicate."**

In each context, Jake is trying to do the same thing: initiate a conversation by announcing he has a question. But it's clear he does this very differently in each context (i.e., each set of settings and participants). How odd it would be if, in his political science class, he lowered his voice and whispered to his professor, "I have to ask you something…" or if he raised his hand in front of his romantic partner and said, "I have a question." These oddities exemplify how *where* we communicate and *who* the participants are constrain (or guide, shape, direct) how we use language to express (and interpret) meaning. In everyday life, context may change multiple times throughout the day. We just saw this with Jake.

Here's another example. In my life, I may be at home with my dog at one time, with my trainer at the fitness center at another, at the grocery store in the produce section with someone who is stocking broccoli on another occasion, in the hallway with a colleague whom I consider a friend, or in the hallway with a colleague whom I don't consider a friend and don't trust. And on Thursdays at 3 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, I am on the air in a studio for *Tea with BVP* with strangers calling in about language acquisition and language teaching. These contexts are all different, and how I interact with each person in each setting may, and often does, change. But that change is not just about *how* I talk about something, but also *what* I talk about. I might tell my dog, "Give me a kiss. I'll be home later." Yet I would never say to a colleague, "Give me a kiss. I'll see you tomorrow." I might talk to the produce guy about his new haircut (he recently got a short Mohawk), but I would not talk to him about second language acquisition and teaching.

Let's stop and think about how I'm writing this chapter for you, the reader, because this situation is also a context. I'm at my computer trying to express some meaning to you, the reader. Your job is to interpret what I mean, sitting wherever you are, likely reading silently to yourself. There are ways to express meaning in this context, and ways not to. And, because we can't negotiate meaning, I reflect a lot more and choose my words more carefully. After all, you're not here in front of me to say, "Huh?" or "Whoa, dude. Can you say that again?"

Moreover, the focus of this book is language teaching, specifically particular principles for

contemporary communicative language teaching. It would be odd for me to suddenly offer you a recipe for my famous Trans-Atlantic paella or my awesome five-chili *mole* for enchiladas. (BTW, that's pronounced 'MOH-lay,' not 'MOHL, like the little critters that dig up your lawn. *Mole* is a Mexican word borrowed from the Aztecs.) Context for communication affects how we communicate and what we communicate about.

Here's one final example of how context affects communication. Remember when we mentioned how men and women communicate differently? Well, compare the following two conversations I overheard on distinct occasions. I selected them for this chapter because they have a related topic. Names have been changed…

[Fred and Dave are working on my house and have just shown up. They haven't seen each other in a while.]

FRED: Man! You're skinny.

DAVE: I know, right?

FRED: Yeah. OK. Let me show you what's up today.

[Chloe and Mimi have just run into each other at the mall.]

CHLOE: Oh, my gosh! Mimi, you look fabulous!

MIMI: Really?

CHLOE: I'm not kidding. You've lost so much weight. It really looks good on you.

MIMI: Thanks. I went on this new exercise program.

CHLOE: Well it worked! How much did you lose?

MIMI: Just over twenty pounds.

CHLOE: What does John think?

MIMI: Oh, that's right. You don't know! We split up.

Acknowledging that we cannot generalize for all men and women, in these interactions I immediately noticed that the men's comment on weight loss was restricted to the concrete without elaboration: Wham, bam! Comment is done and noted. The women's interaction, on the other hand, involves reaction, elaboration, and so on. It would have been odd for the men to do what the women did, and vice versa—that is, for the women to be "perfunctory" like the men. Participants in context help to determine both what is talked about and *how* it is talked about.

Code-switching also exemplifies how context affects communication. Code-switching occurs when a bilingual (a knower of two languages) uses and "mixes" both languages when talking to someone in the same group—another bilingual. I'll use myself as an example when I talk to my sister:

BILL: I've been waiting for you to call.

GLORIA: Dianna and I were checking out the casinos.

BILL: *Hijole.* Man, *nunca les paran las patas*. You have a nice house *y mira*, you're never home.

GLORIA: Ha, ha.

In this typical exchange I mix English and Spanish, something we've done in my family since we could speak. And sometimes that mix is in the same sentence. I do this only because my sister is part of my code-switching bilingual group. I would do this with other people whom I perceive to be part of my group (and I can alter the parameters of that group at any time). However, if I were traveling in Spain, I would not code-switch with native-speakers there, because: (1) I don't perceive them to be part of my group, and (2) I don't know whether they're bilingual like me. So, something like code-switching—the "when and with whom" of it—is determined by context: participants and setting. (Notice that I'm not code-switching with you right now, *¿verdad?*)

Just to say it again, context is essential for shaping communication. In classrooms, context exerts a major and hidden constraint on communication. This is because the context never changes. That is, the setting is always the same: four walls, students' chairs and desks or tables, a teacher's desk or table, and so on, within the broader context of the university/school that make the physical layout constant. The participants and their social roles never change; the students are always the students, and the instructor is always the instructor. Unlike the scenarios we reviewed earlier, there is no dog in the classroom, and the students and teacher are not at home. There is no grocery store and no produce-guy stocking broccoli. There is no hallway with colleagues in it. It is a fixed setting with the same participants every time they meet. The question then becomes, "What kind of meaning can we express, interpret, and negotiate in this fixed context?" Before we can answer this, we need to address the purpose of communication.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

We all learn what "bad words" are in our first language. Think of a bad word, and ask yourself, "In what contexts (in what settings and with what people) would I use that word, and in what contexts would I avoid that word?" What about "bad words" in the classroom? Is the classroom a context in which bad words are "allowed"?

Purpose

People (and entities, if we include non-humans) communicate for a purpose. We don't use language, gestures, signs, or anything else involved in communication without a reason. James F. Lee and I have often talked about communication having two broad, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, purposes: (1) psychosocial, (2) cognitive-informational.

The psychosocial use of language most frequently involves communication to establish, maintain, and effect (and possibly *affect*) relationships and roles among two or more entities. The simplest example involves the use of social exchanges. I drafted this book during an election year, and people periodically called me requesting donations for a candidate, cause or party. When those people called and I answered, our communication typically proceeded as follows:

CALLER: "Hi. Is this Bill VanPatten?
BILL: Yes.
CALLER: Hi, how are you today, Mr. VanPatten?
BILL: Fine. And how are you?
CALLER: Oh, I'm doing great. My name is Stephanie, and I'm calling on behalf of…"

Think of how odd and rude it would have been if I'd answered the phone and the person had said immediately, "I'm calling on behalf of…" That would have been bad communication. We expect some "niceties" as part of such a communicative event to "grease the wheels" of the interaction. The person has to establish contact with me first, establish some kind of relationship, and perform those "niceties" before going on. This is one example of the

psychosocial use of language during communication.

Another example occurs when we use terms of endearment by saying "Yes, dear" to our spouses, or when I say, *"¿Qué quieres, Cariño?"* to my dog. The uses of *dear* and *cariño* (the Spanish equivalent of "dear" or "sweetie") are purposeful and signify to the other person or entity a special status or relationship with me. The same is true when we say "Sir" or "Ma'am" or when we extend a hand when we first meet someone while saying, "Nice to meet you." All of these uses of language as part of the communicative event are psychosocial in nature.

Another major reason we communicate is to express or obtain information, or to learn or do something (i.e., complete a particular task). We call this kind of communication **cognitive-informational use of language**. As you read right now, you are engaging in the cognitive-informational purpose of communication. You're reading because you want information about a particular topic. The grocery clerk asks "Paper or plastic?" to determine which type of bag to pack your items in. The newscaster on the local channel is talking into the camera to communicate information about local and national events, and we watch and listen because we want to "know stuff." The clerk at the running store asks me how I would like to pay, and I say, "With a credit card." I communicate this information to complete a purchase.

In short, the cognitive-informational purpose of communication and language use involves the need to know something, and often the need to perform or complete a task.

In everyday life, psychosocial and cognitive-informational purposes of communication overlap, because we often alternate between them during an interaction. Let's look at an example from the grocery store. (I love grocery stores….) The scene takes place in the seafood section and the clerk is someone I know from my visits to the store. Read over the interaction and note the interweaving of psychosocial and cognitive-informational purposes of communication.

CLERK: Hey, man. What's up? Good to see you. *(psychosocial)*
BVP: Same here. How's it goin'? *(psychosocial)*.
CLERK: Oh, livin' the dream. You know. *(psychosocial)*
BVP: I see you got your hair cut. *(psychosocial)*
CLERK: Yeah. It's easier this way. *(psychosocial and cognitive-informational)*. What can I do for you today? *(cognitive-informational)*
BVP: [pointing] I need a half-pound of this salmon here. *(cognitive-informational)*
CLERK: [weighing and wrapping] Got any plans for the holiday? *(psychosocial)*
BVP: No. Just hanging out with my dog. *(psychosocial)*
CLERK: Here you are. Anything else you need? *(cognitive-informational)*
BVP: Nope. That'll do it. *(cognitive-informational)* Thanks. *(psychosocial)*
CLERK: No problem. Catch you later. *(psychosocial)*

BVP: Later. *(psychosocial)*

In this not so-fictional interchange at my grocery store, it's easy to see how the clerk and I deftly move back and forth between psychosocial and cognitive-informational purposes of language as we communicate. In the latter, our utterances are used to accomplish particular parts of the task of purchasing fish. When he asks, "What can I do for you today?" he is asking me this because he needs to know what to do. I say, "I need a half-pound of salmon," because he can't give me what I want unless I tell him. But when the clerk says, "Got any plans for the holiday?" he is not really interested in what I'm doing. He's just being polite, "making conversation," showing interest in me as a person. My response really makes no difference to him. However, if he wanted to invite me to his house and wanted to know if I'm free, he might say the same thing. Then the question, "Got any plans for the holiday?" would have a different purpose: it would be cognitive-informational, because he needs to know the answer so he can make the invitation "more formal."

> **"The point of this discussion, then, is that communication between two or more entities always has some purpose. …we don't use language for the sake of using language."**

The point of this discussion, then, is: communication between two or more entities always has a purpose. When we use language with each other during a communicative event, we don't do so for the sake of using language. We use language to get something done or to let someone know something. This contrasts with what happens in many language classes—but we are getting ahead of ourselves. Before we talk about classrooms, let's look at two potentially confusing examples of purpose.

When people gossip, what is the purpose? Psychosocial, or cognitive-informational? The answer is that it can be both. First, we tend to gossip only with people we trust (hopefully). We create an intimate "us and not them" environment when we gossip. We send signals during the gossip that we are special to each other, thus maintaining a relationship with someone—as is the purpose of psychosocial use of language. At the same time, we might be exchanging information for a different outcome: I may be warning my gossip partner about something that is going to happen, thus suggesting explicitly or implicitly that she or he should prepare for an event, or maybe not trust someone. This is cognitive-informational. My communication has a purpose that goes beyond the language itself.

I used to—and occasionally still—perform standup comedy. There's nothing as rewarding as being on a stage and trying to be funny—and nothing scarier. But am I communicating with an audience when I do it? If so, what is my purpose? Psychosocial, or cognitive-informational? Clearly the most obvious purpose of a standup comedian is to make people laugh. But what does this have to do with the nature and purpose of communication? To be

sure, standup comedy is a communicative event: I, on stage, am expressing some kind of meaning, and the audience, sitting at their tables, are interpreting that meaning. And if the communication is successful, there is laughter.

Is that laughter a psychosocial or cognitive-informational outcome of the event? Or, as with gossip, might there be some overlap between the two? To be honest, I'm not sure. We might include a third purpose to language use: to entertain. When we tell a joke or write a story, for example, our purpose is to entertain someone in some way. Once again, we see that all communication has a purpose that is not about the language itself, but about something else. Language use without purpose is not communication.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Why do people talk to themselves? What purpose does this serve? Clearly, they aren't "practicing language." So what are they doing?

Language and Communication are Not the Same Thing

By now you should be able to state what communication is, reciting the definition like the Pledge of Allegiance:

> *Communication is the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning with a purpose in a given context.*

Note: this is *not* a definition of language. In Chapter 2 we will discuss the nature of language, defining it as mental representation that is implicit and abstract in nature. That is, "language ≠ the expression and interpretation of meaning…" **Communication can make use of language but encompasses more than language.** How so?

Earlier we discussed dogs communicating. They use eye contact, body posture, tail position and movement, barking, whimpering, and other non-linguistic ways to express a variety of meanings. That is, dogs communicate *without* language. Likewise, when humans communicate, they use more than language, incorporating gestures and body posture (usually unconsciously) as they express and interpret meaning. And sometimes humans

communicate without language, such as soldiers or FBI agents in the field trying to maintain silence by using a system of hand signals and gestures to communication information such as “Cover me,” “You go right, and I’ll go left,” “Move forward” and so on. And if someone winks at you without saying a word, you probably understand what that person means.

The distinction between language and communication is important because people (including teachers and students) often confuse language and communication, sometimes using them interchangeably. Later in this book we will talk about why we really can’t be “language” teachers.

Implications of a Definition of Communication for the Classroom

Why is it important for language teaching to have a working definition of communication? It is important for two main but related reasons. The first is that if we bandy the term “communicative language teaching” or we say “I teach communicatively” then we imply that we have a definition of communication and that this informs what we do.

Imagine, for instance, someone who says, “I’m a French chef” but, when pushed, can’t specify what it means to be a chef in the French tradition. How do we know that chef follows the French tradition? Also, if a psychiatrist says, “We follow the Jungian school,” but has difficulty articulating how her practice is tied to Jung, then how do we know that psychiatrist is truly Jungian? Or if a next-door neighbor says, “I’m a Democrat,” but can’t articulate what the Democratic platform is or what Democrats stand for, then how do we know whether that person is a Democrat or not?

Hopefully the point is clear. “Communicative language teaching” must have some set of underlying principles, including how a definition of communication informs language teaching. So the first implication in our discussion is:

Communicative classrooms involve the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning with a purpose in the context of the classroom.

Such an implication has profound consequences for how we think about and evaluate what we do. Are the instructor and students “practicing” language, or are they actually communicating? To answer this question, we must ask:

- How much time do instructors and students spend on the expression and interpretation of meaning?

- Is there a purpose to this expression and interpretation of meaning (i.e., psychosocial or cognitive-informational)?

A good hard look at many classrooms would suggest that what transpires is language practice, not communication. So how "communicative" are these classrooms? Let's look at what are typically called **display questions**. Display questions are designed to elicit a specific response in order to demonstrate that the responder understands something and can respond with the (one and only one) correct answer. In this example, a teacher is asking questions about colors:

TEACHER: What color is John's shirt?
STUDENT A: White.
TEACHER: White. Correct. And what color is Marie's hoodie?
STUDENT B: Green.
TEACHER: Green. Very good. And what color is my tie?
STUDENT C: Uh, blue and, uh, purple.
TEACHER: Right. It's blue and purple.

Here we see the use of display questions to "practice the vocabulary of colors." There is meaning involved, to be sure: students can't respond if they don't understand the questions. But there is no psychosocial purpose and no cognitive-informational outcome. The interchange has no purpose other than to practice language and colors. The teacher's responses of "correct" and "good," for example, are clearly suggestive of the purpose of the activity. If practicing language is the reason for doing something, then that event or activity cannot be communicative.

Let's contrast this classroom example with an eye exam, in which the eye doctor is testing the patient's ability to perceive colors.

DOCTOR: Tell me what color the square is.
PATIENT: Green.
DOCTOR: Now, what color is this square?
PATIENT: Red.
DOCTOR: Next one. What color do you see?
PATIENT: Blue.
DOCTOR: And now? What color do you see?
PATIENT: Purple.
[The doctor makes notes on the computer.]

In contrast to what happened in class, the eye doctor is not asking display questions to get the patient to practice colors. Instead, the doctor must know if the patient can perceive colors in order to determine any visual problems. Asking the questions has a cognitive-informational outcome: the doctor needs the answers to reveal a conclusion about the

patient's perception.

In short, these are not display questions. They are **context-embedded queries** designed to answer questions about eyesight. There is a purpose and an outcome related to completing a task. In contrast, the teacher asked display questions designed to get learners to practice colors, not to express and interpret meaning. One event is communicative; the other is not. **Just because mouths are moving does not mean a classroom event is communicative.** This is equally true whether we are talking about instructors or students.

Following is another example culled from Pete Brooks' work, published in 1990, looking at classroom interaction in Spanish. The instructor is presumably asking questions about people, but his real intent is to practice adjective agreement. (In Spanish, adjectives must agree with the nouns they modify, as in *la casa blanca* ['the white house'], but *el libro blanco* ['the white book']).

INSTRUCTOR: *¿Es antipática?* ('Is she mean?')
STUDENTS: *No.*
INSTRUCTOR: *No. No es antipática.* ('No. She's not mean.')
STUDENTS: *Es muy simpático.* ('She's very nice.')
INSTRUCTOR: *¿Simpático?* [with rising intonation on the final syllable] ('Nice?')
STUDENT: *Simpática.* ('Nice.')
INSTRUCTOR: *Sí, es muy simpática.* ('Yes, she's very nice,' confirming the grammaticality, not the message.)

In this interchange, it is not clear whether anyone really cares about what is being said (i.e., the meaning or the message). For the instructor, what is important is the *how*: the grammaticality of adjective endings. This exchange therefore has no communicative purpose. Just as important is how students in that class played out the instructors' behaviors when put into pairs to "communicate." Here is an excerpt from a communicative practice between two students:

STUDENT A: *¿Cómo son Carolina y Luz?* ('What are Carolina and Luz like?')
STUDENT B: *Carolina y Luz es, no, son rubi[?]s* ('Carolina and Luz is, no, are blond [vowel quality not clear enough to distinguish between *rubias* and *rubios*, hence the ? in brackets])
STUDENT A: *Son…* ('Are…' [holds tone]) *rubi… a…rubias*.
STUDENT B: *¿A o as?*
STUDENT A: *As.*
STUDENT B: *As. Sí, rubias* [pronounced stress on 'as' of the adjective]

In this “communicative practice” the students are not focused on any real expression or interpretation of meaning; they are looking at a picture together and already know the two females in question are blonde. Instead, the students are doing what they perceive the instructor to be doing; using “communication” to practice a language point. No communicative purpose—psychosocial or cognitive-informational—is discernible in this event; the purpose is simply to practice adjective agreement.

These kinds of interactions are important to review, because teachers often say they teach communicatively and engage in “communicative activities” when they may not be doing so. To repeat: just because mouths are moving doesn’t mean something is communicative. For an event to be communicative, it must have a purpose that is not language-related but related to one of language use’s two major purposes: psychosocial or cognitive-informational.

WHILE WE’RE ON THE TOPIC...

It isn’t easy to imagine gossip in the classroom. But what about entertainment? Are there communicative events in class involving entertainment? (Simply playing music in class does not count!)

This discussion brings us to a second reason why a definition of communication is important in language teaching: context. Once again, context is the setting and the participants:

The classroom is a fixed context that constrains the purpose of communication as well as what gets talked about and how it gets talked about.

By “fixed,” I mean the context never changes. The classroom setting is always the same: four walls, desks/chairs, blackboards/whiteboards, projectors, etc. It is neither a restaurant nor a doctor’s office nor a travel agency. Furthermore, the participants are always the same: the students are students, and the instructor is the instructor, and they have no other roles or occupations during class time. No one is a doctor, a patient, a travel agent, or a client trying to book a trip. This constrained context, then, means certain class activities that some claim to be “communicative” actually are not. (Another chapter will touch on the nature of classroom activities and tasks, so here we will limit our discussion to role-plays.)

Many instructors love role-plays. A role-play involves students acting out various scenes such as ordering a meal in a restaurant or asking questions of a travel agent for a trip. Such

activities are often presented as communicative. But, fun as they may be, are they really communicative? At first blush these activities appear to involve some kind of expression and interpretation of meaning. Yet they are actually not communicative, because they ignore the classroom context and have no purpose other than to practice language. Again, the classroom context is its fixed setting and unchanging participants. Students aren't restaurant customers. They aren't tourists needing help getting from point A to point B. Such activities ignore the actual communicative context of the classroom and try to make the classroom into something it isn't.

I recall discussing this issue at dinner with a Japanese instructor during my visit to another university. She didn't like what I was saying and insisted that, when she created role-plays, she was "changing the context" of the classroom. I said, "No, it's impossible to change the context of the classroom. The classroom can't be anything other than the classroom." She insisted she could change the context. I insisted she could not, because context is defined in a particular way.

This interchange suggested to me that some instructors, when they hear a definition of a construct such as "communicative" or "communication," try to change its meaning to suit what they do. I am not suggesting that role-plays can't be fun, serve some *instructional* purpose, or raise awareness about something related to language and its use; just that, in and of themselves, **role-plays are not communicative activities**. They are simply language practice with no purpose other than to practice doing something with the language, and no psychosocial or cognitive-informational outcome. Nor are they "entertainment." In short, role-plays ignore the classroom context: the setting and the participants.

We will explore in some detail the implications of the definition of communication for classroom activities in the chapter on tasks. But imagine a teacher who recognizes the classroom context and who its participants are. That teacher might create activities or tasks that encourage students to use language to learn about themselves and the world around them. That teacher has purpose behind activities that is not language practice but perhaps something like: "At the end of this activity, you will know exactly what questions to ask someone to truly find out where they fall on a scale of neat/messy." Or, "At the end of this activity, we will know whether we fit into the guidelines for good sleep habits as determined by the National Sleep Foundation." We will explore tasks and activities in the communicative classroom in another chapter. For now, keep the following statement in mind:

> *The definition of communication informs what it means for a classroom to be communicative.*

Foundational Readings

Lee, J. F., & VanPatten, B. (2003). *Making communicative language teaching happen* (2nd

Ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. W. (Eds.). (1983). *Language and communication*. New York, NY: Longman, Inc. (See especially the chapters "The Domain of Pragmatics," "Rules of Speaking," and "The Structure of Teachers' Directives.")
Savignon, S. (1998). *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Discussion Questions and Food for Thought

1. Review the chapter and make a list of all bolded or italicized words (except non-English words), terms and concepts. Can you define each one or explain what it means? Can you give examples?
2. Describe how context affects or doesn't affect how you communicate and use language. Example: how you text a friend versus how you write an email message to a professor or a superior. Try to give at least three examples in which context causes you to change how you use language and how you communicate.
3. Watch ten minutes of a TV show or ten minutes of a movie with the sound turned off. What messages do you pick up through facial expressions and body posture or gestures when you can't rely on language?
4. Observe a language classroom and make note of the following:
   a. What is the ratio of display questions (designed to practice language) to context-embedded questions (designed to get information about a topic)?
   b. What is the ratio of teacher responses such as "Right," "Correct," "Good" "Excellent," and so on, to responses such as "I didn't know that," "Really? You did that?", "I can't believe that," and others? Do you see the difference between the response types? What do they indicate about the focus of the teacher?
5. This chapter stated that classrooms are fixed contexts. Review what this means. How would you answer these questions?
   a. How does the classroom context influence both what is talked about and how it is talked about?
   b. Which of the following makes the greatest sense to you at this time:
   (1) Classrooms are good places for the psychosocial purpose of communication.
   (2) Classrooms are good places for the cognitive-informational purpose of communication.
6. Based on what you know so far, how do you react to the following statement: "Language classrooms can be, at best, 50% communicative in nature."
7. List at least five things you learned in this chapter that you did not know before. If you are taking a class, compare your list with someone else's. Do your two lists reveal anything?

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

		YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1.	I can offer a working definition of communication.	◯	◯	◯
2.	I can describe the two major purposes of communication.	◯	◯	◯
3.	I understand how the classroom is a "limited context" environment for communication.	◯	◯	◯
4.	I can describe/explain how knowledge about communication informs choices and behaviors in terms of language teaching.	◯	◯	◯

CLT PRINCIPLE

Language is Too Abstract and Complex to Teach and Learn Explicitly

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I understand what it means for language to be abstract.	○	○	○
2. I understand what it means for language to be complex.	○	○	○
3. I understand the sentence "What's on page 32 of the textbook is not what winds up in your head."	○	○	○
4. I can define what "implicit" means and give an example of implicit language.	○	○	○
5. I understand the "water cannot become fatty acid" metaphor.	○	○	○
6. I can explain the "water cannot become fatty acid" metaphor to someone else.	○	○	○

The principle at the center of this chapter concerns the nature of language:

Language is too abstract and complex to teach and learn explicitly. As such, any approach to language teaching in the classroom must be different from approaches to teaching other subjects (e.g., history, science).

In this chapter we will explore the following:

- *Language is not a collection of rules and structures.*
- *Language is an abstract, implicit, and complex mental representation.*
- *As mental representation, it cannot be taught and learned explicitly, as happens with other "subject matter." Language teaching needs its own pedagogy.*

Pull out any university course catalog or look at any 9-12 offerings in secondary schools. What do you see? Chemistry. Biology. Psychology. History. And the list goes on. Their common thread is that they are subjects to study. To do so, a person reads, attends lectures and discussions, writes and interacts with teachers and students about these subjects, takes tests on them to demonstrate knowledge about them, and receives a grade on a transcript that indicates how well that person did in that subject matter. Underlying this approach to studies is that chemistry, biology, psychology, history, etc., are "things to know about." A student gains knowledge about topics and ideas.

Then we come to what are called Modern or World Languages. In these same university catalogs or 9-12 offerings, one finds Spanish, French, German, Japanese, Russian, Chinese, Arabic, and, depending on the university or school, others such as Turkish, Vietnamese, and Quechua. Embedded in the context of chemistry, biology, psychology and other areas, languages are viewed as subject matter: things to be learned and tested. And, like all subject matters, a student receives a grade in a language course on the transcripts to show how well that person did on that subject matter. In Modern or World Languages, language becomes the object of study: a student gains knowledge about a language.

> **"Language is not something to be learned the way a person learns other subject matter if the goal is to develop communicative ability."**

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that language is not something to be learned the way a person learns other subjects if the goal is to develop communicative ability. To make this argument, we will concentrate on the nature of language. The argument is simple: **Language is not what most people think it is.**

This chapter paints language as an implicit, abstract, complex thing of the mind quite unlike what most people think it is—and for those waiting for the punch line, here it is: **Language is certainly not what you find in language textbooks.** Or, as I repeatedly say: **What's on page 32 of the textbook is not what winds up in your head.** And by this I don't mean that what is presented in textbooks isn't the way people actually talk—although this may be true. What I mean is that grammar in language textbooks isn't psychologically real. To begin this journey of the nature of language, we start with a staple in all grammar instruction: the subject of a sentence.

What's the Subject of a Sentence?

Any modern language textbook makes reference to the subject of a sentence. For example, in Spanish and Turkish you might find the "rule" that verbs must agree with their subjects

such that in Spanish, for example, *(ella) habla* ('she speaks') is grammatical but *(tú) habla* ('you speaks') is not. The sentence must be *(tú) hablas*. Or you might find a reference to subject pronouns as words that stand in place of the subject of a sentence. So, *he* refers to *Jake*, or *the boy*, or *the man over there*, and she refers to *Bette*, or *the girl*, or *the woman over there*.

Ignoring for now whether these are good rules or statements about language, what they have in common is an underlying assumption that we all know in some explicit way what a subject is. But do we? Intuitively, we certainly do, or none of us could comprehend or speak a first or second (or third or' fourth…) language. The concept of 'subject' is basic to sentence structure in any language.

But how do you define 'subject' if asked? A Google search for the definition of the subject of a sentence brings up a variety of responses. Here are two:

- The subject of a sentence is the person, place, thing, or idea that is doing or being something.

- The subject of a sentence is the person or thing doing the action or being described.

For the typical reader, these definitions might seem fine, especially for sentences with action verbs and adjectives. In *Bill drinks coffee every day, drink* is an action verb, and *Bill* is the drinker—so he's the subject. Or, in *Bill is caffeinated now*, we could say *Bill* is the subject, because he is the person being described. Fine so far. Now let's look at the following sentences.

(1) My brother fumes when he hears that name.
(2) A good friend is dying.

In these examples, there is no one doing anything. In (1) *My brother* (the subject) is not a *fumer*. Nor is he being described. That is, he is not *fumed*. You can't even say this in English and have it make sense to mean he's ticked off (i.e., *My brother is really fumed about that* sounds weird at best). In (2), *my good friend* (the subject) is not a *dier*. And he is not being described. (He is not dead—yet). In both of these cases, the subjects don't do anything. Instead, they are what we call "experiencers." My brother is experiencing the event of fuming. My good friend is experiencing the onset of death. So, our definitions for sentential subject don't work.

Now let's look at the interesting case of *sink*:

(3) The captain is sinking the boat.
(4) The boat is sinking.

Clearly, in (3) we would all agree that the captain is the subject of *is sinking* and *the boat* is the object of *sink*. But in (4), suddenly *the boat* is the subject! The verb hasn't changed, but the subject has. How can an object become a subject, and how does this fit into the definitions above? The same is true for *break*, as in: *The boy broke the window with a rock; The rock broke the window; The window broke*. How did the object *window* become the subject of the verb *break*?

Oh, and here's one more, just for fun:
ME: Do me a favor and taste the sauce? How is it?
FRIEND: Mmm. The sauce tastes good!

So, *sauce* is the object of the verb *taste* in my question, and in my friend's response it is the subject!
Let's look at one more example:

(5) The cat chases the dog.
(6) The dog is chased by the cat.

In these two sentences, we would agree that *the cat* is the subject in (5) and *the cat* is indeed the chaser. But in (6) *the dog* is the subject, while *the cat* remains the chaser. Once again, the object of one sentence becomes the subject of another when both sentences express the exact same event. Weird, right? But this is that happens with what we call "passive" structures. The object of an "active" sentence becomes the subject of a passive sentence.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Why do languages have both active and passive structures? Why don't they just keep it simple and have only active structures? Is there a "rule" for when to use an active versus a passive structure, or vice versa? Good questions, all of them!

What's a Filler Subject?

Filler subjects are inserted when a sentence has no identifiable subject, typically for sentences involving weather expressions, telling time, impersonal statements, or existential statements (among others). In short, they "fill in" for where a subject is supposed to be.

Languages like English and French require “filler” subjects, and languages like Spanish and Turkish prohibit filler subjects.

Here are some examples in English and Spanish. In English, the filler subjects are *it* and *there*. (Note: An asterisk indicates the sentence is not permitted in that language; it is a bad sentence.)

(7) **TIME:** *It is three o’clock*, but not **Is three o’clock*.
(8) **TIME:** *Son las tres*, but not **Ello es las tres/*Ellos son las tres*.
(9) **WEATHER:** *It’s raining*, but not **Is raining*.
(10) **WEATHER:** *Está lloviendo*, but not **Ello está lloviendo*.
(11) **EXISTENTIAL:** *There’s coffee on the table*, but not **Is coffee on the table*.
(12) **EXISTENTIAL:** *Hay café en la mesa*, but not **Allí/Ello hay café en la mesa*.

What kinds of subjects are *it* and *there* in these sentences? The sentence isn’t about an “it” or a “there.” No “it” or “there” is doing any action or experiencing anything. These are filler subjects required in English, French, German and other languages. Remember: subject pronouns are said to stand in place of some other noun or noun phrase (e.g., *he* = *John, the man, the boy over there*)? But *it* and *there* do not stand in for anything or refer to some other noun or noun phrase. (So much for the Google definition.)

Maybe there’s a structural definition to subjects. Here’s another popular definition involving structure:

- A subject is a word that gives the verb its ending (that is, subjects and verbs must agree).

How does this definition fare? It works great in Spanish and Turkish, languages in which the subject and verb do “agree” in every tense, mood and other kind of verb form. For example, in Spanish, *Bill toma café* (‘Bill drinks coffee’) and *Bill y Daniel toman café* (‘Bill and Daniel drink coffee’) show that the difference in subjects (singular versus plural) is reflected in the verb form. But in English, the only verb form that ever agrees with the subject is third-person singular: *Bill drinks*… but *I/You/We/You all/They drink*…. And in the past tense, no verb agrees with the subject: *I/You/Bill/We/You all/They drank*…

Now let’s look at Chinese and Japanese, two languages that have no subject-verb agreement for anything in any time frame. In Japanese, *nomimasu* is the present-tense form of ‘drink,’ no matter who is drinking, and *nomimashita* is the form of ‘drank,’ no matter who was drinking. In Mandarin, *hē* is the verb, no matter who is drinking and no matter whether the situation is past or present. So the definition of sentential subject can’t be something about how it makes verbs agree; otherwise, a whole bunch of languages would not follow the definition!

But what happens in Spanish, Turkish, Chinese, Arabic, and many other languages in

which sentences have no expressed subjects? For example, I can begin a conversation with:

(13) *Tomo café todas las mañanas* ('I drink coffee every morning')

This Spanish sentence has no word equivalent of *I*. Spanish does have the pronoun *yo*, which means *I*, but it is not necessary in this sentence. So, this sentence has no overt subject, but it does have a *covert* subject, or what we linguists call a *null subject*. Technically this sentence does have a subject—it just isn't overt! It's hidden, but it's there. It's covert. It's null.

Finally, can you identify the subject of the verb *remains* in this sentence?

(14) Whether or not Bill drinks coffee remains to be seen.

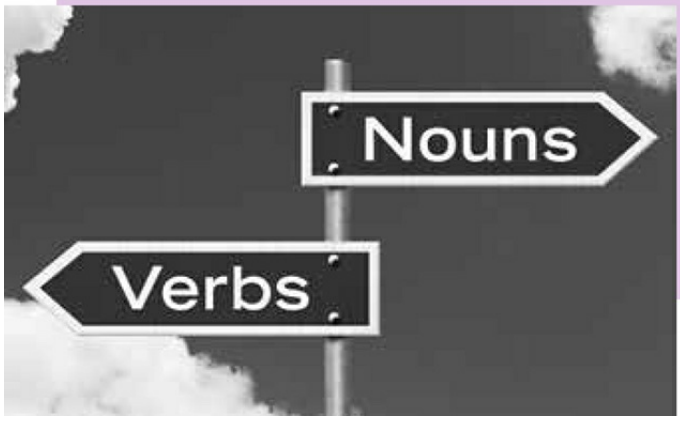
If you said *whether or not Bill drinks coffee* is the subject, you are correct. An entire clause is the subject of this sentence. So sentences are not just nouns or nouns and their adjectives; an entire clause can be a subject!

So what is a sentential subject? Here's what linguistic theory would define as a subject: *The subject of a sentence is that nominal which occupies the Specifier position of the Tense Phrase*. This definition probably makes no sense to the average reader. What's a Tense Phrase? What's the Specifier position? And what's a nominal? Well, linguists have answers to these questions, but they involve a good deal of technical information that we will not get into here.

The definition of a sentential subject—the one that works every time and is built into the mental representation of every speaker of a first, second, third or other language—is the technical one just presented. This definition is abstract in nature and defies everyday description. Yet teachers and textbooks rely on this abstract, implicit knowledge about subjects when they tell students such things as "the subject and verb must agree" and "invert the subject and verb when making a question." These kinds of statements are called "pedagogical rules," and we will see in the rest of this chapter why they aren't actual rules.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

What's a noun? What's a verb? What's the difference between the two? Verbs, for example, don't represent just actions such as run and drink. What about *die*? Or *seem*? Or *be* in *Bill is a coffee drinker*? How about *snow*, as in *It snows a lot in Michigan*? Yet we know what a verb is when we hear or see one, right?



Examples of 'Rules'

Now we'll look at some examples of what a student might learn in a textbook, through an Internet search, or even from an instructor. One example will come from Spanish, the other from English. (For the courageous reader who wants to see an example from a different language, I suggest one of the Foundational Reading selections: my article called "Why explicit knowledge cannot become implicit knowledge".) Here's a spoiler alert: we will see that these rules just don't hold water. And many readers will be tempted to say, "Well, all rules have exceptions." Language doesn't like exceptions, and avoids them if possible. The "rules" we will look at do not involve exceptions.

An Example from Spanish

Let's begin with one of my favorite examples. Spanish has a case marker for object nouns that appears under certain circumstances. ("Case" refers to whether something is a subject, an object, the object of a preposition, and so on.) It is often called "personal *a*" because it is typically associated with marking persons when they are objects of the verb and not used when persons are not the object. Here are two examples:

(15) *María conoce a Juan.* 'Mary knows John.'
(16) *María conoce la materia.* 'Mary knows the material.'

What do students learn about so-called "personal *a*" in textbooks or from online sites? Here is a typical rule that students might find.

- In Spanish, when the direct object is a person, it is preceded by the preposition 'a.' This

word has no English translation. The personal 'a' is not used when the direct object is not a person or is an animal for which no personal feelings are felt.

This rule seems to work for these two examples. But what about these?

(17) *¿Conoces un buen médico?* 'Do you know a good doctor?'
(18) *Tengo una hermana.* 'I have a sister.'
(19) *El camión sigue al carro.* 'The truck is following the car.'
(20) *El chico asustó al coyote.* 'The boy scared the coyote.'

Clearly a person is an object in (17), but no *a* is used (i.e., 'doctor' is a person). In fact, it shouldn't be used—at least not in my dialect. However, no Spanish-speaking person would use the object marker *a* in (18). Yet, both of these examples involve a "person" as the object of the verb. In (19), *a* marks the object of the verb (*al* is a contracted version of *a*, and the definite article *el*). However, a car is not a person. How does this example fit with the rule above? In (20), did the boy have personal feelings for the coyote? I don't think so. Perhaps the boy was on a hike, stumbled upon the poor animal, and scared it. Then it ran away. Yet there's our "personal *a*" in front of a non-person for which the subject has no personal feelings. So much for this particular rule.

Just what *is* the rule for the use of this thing called "personal *a*"? Well, first of all, we shouldn't call it "personal *a*" because of what we just observed: you don't always have to mark a person with the *a* when the person is an object of a verb and sometimes you mark non-persons with the *a*.

But to answer the question about what "the rule is," let's first ask another question: does it make any difference if we can specify a rule here? In the present case, the underlying knowledge that a native speaker or competent second language learner of Spanish has of object-marking is quite abstract. How would such abstract information help the learner? To the point, the use of the case marker in Spanish is governed by a complex interplay of abstract features such as definiteness, specificity, agency, and, to an extent, animacy (i.e., whether both the subject and object can be the other thing, as in *The dog follows the boy* and *The boy follows the dog*). Surely we don't want to tell learners that they must first determine the definiteness, specificity, agency, animacy or other underlying details of the noun phrases involved before they can determine if the *a* is needed. Isn't it enough to know for this chapter that this knowledge is abstract and doesn't look at all like textbook rules? Without knowing any technical "rule" that linguists have come up with, the central point of this chapter is this: **language is not what you find in textbooks.**

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Why do languages have case-marking at all? Japanese and Turkish, for example, systematically mark case, as does Russian. German case-marking is not clear (e.g., nominative and accusative case are different for masculine, but there is no similar case distinction for feminine and neuter). English does not mark case, except on pronouns (e.g., *she* versus *her*), and, regardless of what you may have learned about good and bad use of language, case marking gets obliterated in spoken English when the noun is complex (e.g., we can say either *She and I went to the store* or *Me and her went to the store*). That is, something allows native speakers of English to ignore "correct" case marking with complex nouns. Wouldn't it be easier just not to have case? So why do languages have case-marking at all?

An Example From English

Here's another neat example about the abstract nature of language. We just saw in the previous section that Spanish marks objects under certain conditions with the little functional word *a*. We also saw earlier that a sentential subject is an abstract concept indefinable in lay terms.

Now let's look at nominative (i.e., the case marking on subjects) and non-nominative cases in English. What's the rule for when you use, say, *I* versus *me*? Most readers would say, "Use *I* for subjects and *me* for objects of verbs and prepositions." This is what is found in textbooks. Let's see how this rule works with some sample sentences.

(21) I see Harry at work every day.
(22) Harry sees me at work every day.

In these sentences, our rule seems to work. In the first, *I* is the subject of the verb, and in the second, *me* is the object of the verb.

Now let's look at these sentences:

(23) Harry wants me to fire John.
(24) *Harry wants I to fire John.

Each of these sentences has two verbs: *wants* and *fire*. Who is the subject of *fire* in each case? The answer is *I*. But, as the asterisk indicates in (24), *I* is not possible as the subject pronoun of *fire*. Hmmm. What's going on here?

Let's look at some more sentences. What if someone asks at the door without opening it, "Who's there?" How do you respond?

(25) Who's there? Me./*Me am.
(26) Who's there? *I/I am.

In the first sentence, *me* is the correct response. As the second sentence shows, *I* would be incorrect. But the minute we add the verb *am*, the reverse is true: *I am* is correct, but *Me am* is not! Two different responses to the same question, neither of which uses the same pronoun. Again, hmmm…

Now let's look at the curious case of subjects containing two nouns, which we touched on in the previous "While we're on the topic":

(27) Harry and I went to the office party together.
(28) Harry and me went to the office party together.
(29) Me and Harry went to the office party together.

Wow. When the subject consists of a complex noun (e.g., two or more nouns/pronouns), the rule doesn't appear to hold. Both *I* and *me* can be part of the complex subject noun phrase. Yes, yes, your grade school teacher told you that (28) and (29) are not "good English," and Judge Judy loves to correct people on her show when they say things like *Me and him met up at the restaurant*. The point here is not whether such sentences are good English, but whether they are *possible* English sentences. And they are—otherwise, we wouldn't say them in everyday spoken English. Acceptability/appropriateness is not the same as possibility. Compare with the asterisked items (24) through (26) above in which we have impossible uses of pronouns—things you don't hear because, well, they're not possible.

> **"Language is not what you find in textbooks."**

So our simple rule that *I* is a subject pronoun and *me* is an object pronoun doesn't always hold. I know you are dying to find out what the "rule" is for the use of pronouns, and it comes down to this:

- When the sentence contains a finite verb (one with tense marked on it), English requires the nominative case in singular pronouns.

- When the sentence does not contain a finite verb, English requires non-nominative case on singular pronouns.

This has to do with what is called "case checking" in the underlying syntax of the sentence. (Remember our definition of "subject" from the first section of this chapter? *The subject is the nominal that occupies the Specifier position of the Tense Phrase*.) Tough stuff, I know, but what happens is that nouns "move up" out of the Verb Phrase to get their case features checked in the Tense Phrase. The Specifier position makes sure the case is correct. (Another "Wow!" More abstract, complex stuff going on behind the scenes. That's the nature of language. Makes you want to take a course in linguistics, right?)

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

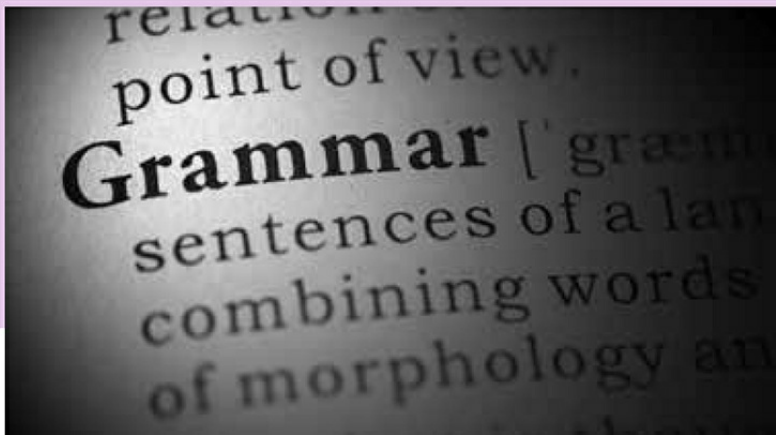
Linguists often talk about three different kinds of "grammar":

(1) Prescriptive grammar: how teachers and others tell you should talk/write;

(2) Pedagogical grammar: the kinds of rules and information we see in textbooks; and

(3) Descriptive grammar: what's actually in people's heads.

So, when you use the term "grammar" with colleagues and others, do you know what you actually mean by the term? For that matter, what do you mean when you use the term "language"? (Unless indicated otherwise, I use "grammar" and "language" to mean what's in people's heads—the more technical definitions.)



Back to the Nature of Language

This book will not take you through a detailed exploration of how textbook rules don't match what's in people's heads. The previous examples about the natures of subjects, case-marking in Spanish and subject versus non-subject pronouns in English should be enough to make any reader go, "OK, then. There's much more to language than meets the eye." The takeaway, once again, is that regardless of whether a person is a first or second language

speaker of a language, what winds up in the mind/brain as mental representation for language is:

- **abstract;**
- **complex;**
- **implicit.**

Let's quickly summarize what these three characteristics mean:

- *Language is abstract, in that it consists of things typical "lay" language cannot easily describe.* Linguists invest a good deal of effort into understanding language as a system and have arrived at many conclusions about its nature. These conclusions are full of abstract constructs such as "underlying features," "functional versus lexical categories," "phrase structure," and "movement and merge." Such constructs (and others) have become necessary, because the more linguists have probed the nature of language, the more they have realized just how abstract the system in our heads is.

- *Language is complex because of its many components.* We previously touched on things related only to syntax (constraints on sentence structure). But just think of what is involved in any simple sentence. Let's go back to *Bill is a coffee drinker.* When this sentence is spoken or heard, the mind must do incredibly quick processing of the sound system (and pronunciation), words (their meaning, their structure), syntax (relationships among words), rhythm and tone, intent (Is the person merely making a statement, or is that person complaining about something?), among other things. All of these components constantly interact in fast, complex ways so we can produce and understand language. And if you were interacting with sign language, the situation would be equally complex.

- *Language is an implicit system; its content lies outside of our conscious awareness.* We know we have language in our heads—that's for sure. But what we don't know as everyday human beings is the content of that system. We saw this, for example, in the section on sentential subjects: we all have implicit knowledge about subjects but can't articulate it. This is what "implicit" means; things in our head we cannot (easily) articulate. We have intuitions about those things but cannot quite put those intuitions into words.

For a good non-technical book on the nature of language, I highly recommend Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct.* It's listed in the Foundational Readings of this chapter, and it's a book I tell my students about. I especially recommend its Chapter 4, "How Language Works," as well as Chapter 5, "Words, Words, Words." These are very accessible introductions to the complexity and abstractness of language.

Before moving on, I need to be honest: Not all current theories in second language

research adopt the same perspective on the nature of language. We don't need to go into how these theories view language here (I will let them do that in their own books for language teachers). I take what is called a Chomskyan perspective on language. But one thing is clear, regardless of most theories: What's on page 32 of the textbook is not what winds up in your head. Textbook rules just aren't psychologically real.

Implications for Language 'Teaching'

Hopefully, your head is not exploding from the brief but necessary romp through the nature of language in the previous sections. And imagine: What we reviewed is the tip of the iceberg. There is so much more to language than the ideas presented previously. But, again, this is not a course on linguistics or the nature of language. The aim of this chapter is to illustrate how language is abstract, complex, and implicit. Before reviewing implications for teaching, let's step back and remind ourselves of a couple of things:

Much earlier, I said: **Language is something internal, not external**. After the previous sections, this may be clear to you. But let's spell it out anyway. Each of us creates a mental representation we call language. This is true for first, second, and subsequent languages. We create an abstract and complex linguistic system, though we are not aware of this. This is also why language is implicit: We know we have language in our heads, but we don't really know what its content is (unlike linguists, who occupy themselves with the nature of language as part of cognitive science). As mental representation, then, language is internal. It's the stuff in our minds. Sure, when we speak or communicate, we may use language, so language may seem external. But communication and language are not the same. (We touched on this in Chapter 1 when we reviewed how communication works.)

> **"Each and everyone of us creates a mental representation we call language. We create an abstract and complex system even though we don't know this."**

In short, communication is the external use of internal things—and *one* of those internal things is language.

So, what are some of the implications of the nature of language for "language teaching"? I will begin with what I think is the most important implication, from which the others follow:

Language, as mental representation, is too abstract and complex to teach and learn explicitly.

This implication suggests that we can't go into Spanish 101 or French 102 classes and talk about "features," "phrase structure," or many of the other constructs that occupy

linguists. This wouldn't make sense. (It makes sense for a linguistics class, but not for a language class.) Just imagine trying to tell a first-semester student of English as a Second Language (ESL), "Well, when a clause is finite, the subject must be in nominative case…" The looks on their faces would be priceless.

In short, language as mental representation is not the rules and paradigms that appear on textbook pages. Which leads us to another implication:

Explicit rules (and paradigm lists) can't become the abstract and complex system, because the two things are completely different.

This particular implication stems from the fact that no internal mechanism can convert explicit textbook rules into implicit mental representation (which we will see in the chapter on acquisition).

Let's use a metaphor to illustrate what we mean. Everyone knows ice is frozen water and water's basic molecule is H_2O—two atoms of hydrogen, one atom of oxygen. So the underlying molecular structures of water and ice are the same: both are H_2O. (They differ in speed of vibration of molecules.) So when we turn water into ice and ice back into water, we don't change the essence of either: H_2O is H_2O.

The molecular makeup of a basic fatty acid is CH3(CH2)nCOOH, and its visual depiction is mind-boggling. But could we turn water into a fatty acid and a fatty acid into water by freezing? That is, can you take one molecule of H_2O and turn it into one molecule of CH3(CH2)nCOOH? Not in any way known to humankind. Their makeups are fundamentally different.

Well, explicit rules and the mental representation we carry around for language are like water and fatty acid: One can't become the other. They are fundamentally different. This would explain, then, why what an instructor teaches and has students practice on page 32 doesn't become mental representation. What's on page 32 is water. What winds up in the head is fatty acid.

This leads us to a shortened version of the principle of this chapter:

Language must be treated differently in the classroom from other subject matters (e.g., history, philosophy, or biology).

Most textbooks, and many teachers, continue to treat language like any other subject—something you can explicitly teach and then test. Teachers and textbooks "explain," students (hopefully) "practice" in some way, teachers provide them with feedback on how well they have done, and finally students receive tests of their "knowledge" of the subject:

- Did they learn the preterit endings correctly in Spanish?

- Have they learned the rule for correct selection of the auxiliary in the French *passé composé*?

- Have they learned the correct case-markings for articles in German or for nouns in Russian?

However, what winds up in the human mind does not resemble anything on textbook pages or what teachers say. (The same may be true for subjects such as history and math, but we will let experts in those areas make their own arguments. We are focused on language here.)

Now, many would argue that, even though what's on page 32 of the textbook doesn't wind up in learners' minds/brains, it is still useful, or maybe even necessary. Underlying this argument is that SLA is not like first language acquisition. These issues will be explored in the chapter on acquisition, and, depending on what the reader has been exposed to or what beliefs have built up in the reader's mind, that discussion of acquisition may cause some raised eyebrows.

Yet the discussion in this chapter does not mean we cannot "teach" language. Of course, we can. But that may depend on what is meant by "teach." In some sense, the classroom is probably the ideal place for a learner to begin the language acquisition journey this book is about.

Foundational Readings

Pinker, S. (2007). *The language instinct: How the mind creates language*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial. (See especially Chapter 3, "Mentalese," and Chapter 4, "How language works.")

Radford, A., Atkinson, M., Britain, D., Clahsen, H., & Spencer, A. (2009). *Linguistics: An introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Schwartz, B. (1993). On explicit and negative data effecting and affecting competence and linguistic behavior. *Studies in second language acquisition, 15,* 147-163.

VanPatten, B. (2016). Why explicit knowledge cannot become implicit knowledge. *Foreign Language Annals*.

VanPatten, B. & Rothman, J. (2014). Against "Rules." In A. Benati, C. Laval, & M. J. Arche (Eds.), *The grammar dimension in instructed second language acquisition: theory, research, and practice* (pp. 15-35). London, UK: Bloomsbury.

Note: Although Noam Chomsky is, unarguably, the force behind contemporary linguistics and ideas on the nature of language, I have not included any of his writings here, as they are too advanced and technical for our purposes. So the Radford et al. book would be a good introduction.

Discussion Questions and Food for Thought

1. Review the chapter and make a list of all bolded or italicized words (except non-English words), terms and concepts. Can you define each one or explain what it means? Can you give examples of your definition?
2. Survey up to ten language teachers. Find out how many have taken introductory courses in linguistics and the nature of language. (You might want to embed the question in a series of, say, five other questions so they don't know what you are looking for.) What are your findings? What implications, if any, are there for teacher preparation from your findings?
3. Language isn't what most people think it is. Reflect on your own thoughts about language and ask yourself, "Has this chapter changed my thinking about the nature of language?" If not, what would it take to change your thinking? If it indeed has changed, try to pinpoint some ideas in the chapter that pushed you along to change your perspective on language.
4. Now that you have read about both communication and language, can you explain why they are not the same? What is their relationship, if any?
5. Read the chapter on "How Language Works" in Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct*. (Its reference is above, under **Foundational Readings**.) Prepare a report to share with others in which you share five of the main points Pinker makes in this chapter. In what ways do those points overlap those made in this chapter?
6. Read Chapter 18 on sentence structure, "Basic Terminology," in Radford et al. (see **Foundational Readings**). Explain three takeaways you learned from their chapter that augment what you have learned in this chapter.
7. Can you think of elements of the language you teach or will teach that seem almost impossible to explain in simple terms? Are there sufficient and significant exceptions to the "rule" that render it not particularly good and suggest that something else is happening in the language? Here's an example from Spanish. (For those who don't know Spanish, it has two verbs that mean 'to be.'): "Use *estar* with situations that aren't permanent, such as *Está enfermo* ('He's sick') and *Está triste* ('She's sad')." But then you must use *estar* in *Está muerto* ('He's dead'). Nothing more permanent than that! And you must also use *ser* in *Es joven* ('She's young'). Isn't youth temporary?
8. In this chapter we discussed the difference between an external description of language, such as a textbook rule, and what actually exists inside someone's head as grammar. An external "rule" is: During the day the sky is blue, and at night it is virtually black. This is a "rule" in that you can count on it every day, as long as it isn't cloudy. But this is a description of something far more complex and abstract. Do an Internet search to find out why the sky is blue during the day and black at night. Does this help you understand the difference between what's on page 32 and what's in your head regarding language?

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I understand what it means for language to be abstract.	◯	◯	◯
2. I understand what it means for language to be complex.	◯	◯	◯
3. I understand the sentence "What's on page 32 of the textbook is not what winds up in your head."	◯	◯	◯
4. I can define what "implicit" means and give an example of implicit language.	◯	◯	◯
5. I understand the "water cannot become fatty acid" metaphor.	◯	◯	◯
6. I can explain the "water cannot become fatty acid" metaphor to someone else.	◯	◯	◯

CLT PRINCIPLE

Language Acquisition is Constrained by Internal and External Factors

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I can list the basic characteristics of language acquisition.	○	○	○
2. I understand that language acquisition is constrained.	○	○	○
3. I can describe the two major types of constraints: internal and external.	○	○	○
4. I understand that instruction cannot alter acquisition processes.	○	○	○
5. I can offer examples of linguistic development over time.	○	○	○

The principle at the center of this chapter concerns the nature of language acquisition:

Language acquisition is constrained by internal and external factors. Learners create mental representation.

In this chapter we will explore these points:

- *Learners come to the task of acquisition with built-in mechanisms for language processing and storage.*
- *Communicative input is the essential external ingredient for language acquisition.*
- *Language acquisition cannot be altered by explicit instruction and practice.*

These topics will lay the groundwork for instruction that works with acquisition, not against it.

Language acquisition is relatively simple, right? You learn some rules or vocabulary, you

practice what you learn, people correct you so you improve, and over time you learn the language. Many people think this, including teachers, students, and people on the street. On the other hand, you also hear people say, “I took four years of high-school French but can’t speak a word,” or “The only way to learn a language is to go live where it’s spoken.” These latter comments suggest something quite different from the study + practice belief. Who is right?

These different perspectives warrant serious study of how languages are acquired. Fortunately, we have almost 50 years of empirical research under our belts; some of it offers important insights into two fundamental questions:

(1) How does SLA happen?
(2) How different, if at all, is SLA from first language acquisition?

It isn’t clear how many of the basics of SLA have leapt over the “research” barrier into teachers’, students’, and the more general population’s knowledge of this fundamental behavior in humans. It’s even less clear how such information has informed language-teaching materials. So, if you haven’t formally studied the nature of SLA (or, for that matter, first language acquisition), this will be a good place to begin.

But before we start, I offer a simple caution. As you read, you will find that many traditional notions about language teaching simply don’t hold, especially the roles of explicit teaching and practice. And I will describe how **important internal and external forces shape and constrain language acquisition**.

However, don’t assume that the research on SLA suggests there is no role for instruction. Instruction can be defined in many different ways—and this book aims to help you define instruction differently from the way it often is. My hope is that, in the end, you will conclude what I concluded some time ago: the contemporary instructor of language has a role to play in many ways that are much more important than traditional roles.

Now let’s start with the basics.

Some Basics About Second Language Acquisition

Second language acquisition is a **rich, complex, and dynamic process**. It is impossible to reduce it to simple notions. Why? Because language and communication are rich and complex in themselves (see Chapters 1 and 2), and something as complex as language (or communication) is probably acquired in a complex way. With this in mind, we will focus on (but not reduce to) a handful of basics about SLA in this section. As the chapter progresses, we will continue to paint the complex picture that is acquisition.

We’ve all seen ads telling us, “Learn to speak Chinese in just thirty days.” Is this possible? No. These ads fail to say that a person can learn to perform certain functions in Chinese in thirty days but would have tremendous difficulty actually speaking it. In fact, no

one can learn a language in thirty days—probably not even in thirty months. Our first point, then, is that **language acquisition is slow and piecemeal**.

Let's look at first language acquisition as a starting point. We know that first language acquisition actually begins in the womb. At some point late in gestation, the fetus is sensitive to sounds related to language. Once born, language acquisition becomes imperative as the child learns to interact with the world around him or her. A good deal of language is in place by the age of five. To be sure, a number of communicatively oriented aspects of language use are missing, and the child certainly hasn't experienced all contexts of communication to acquire adult-like ability. In addition, the child has normally not yet spent time in a literate environment. Research has shown that literacy and exposure to written language does something to expand parts of language and communication that aren't part of oral language use. We'll see an example in a minute.

Mental representation for language and all basic aspects of language are pretty much in place by age six. Overall, the syntax (constraints on sentences), morphology (constraints on the shapes of words), phonology (the sound system and constraints on combinations of sounds) and other formal parts of the language system are acquired.

> **"Second language acquisition is a rich, complex, and dynamic process. One reason for this is that language and communication are rich and complex themselves."**

So let's work backwards. How much time has the child spent "learning language" by age six? Though we know language acquisition begins prior to the first birthday, let's focus on ages 1 to 6, or five years. If we calculate that a child is exposed to language for about eight hours a day, how many hours of exposure and interaction does that child have in four years? Here's the math:

8 hours × 7 days/week × 52 weeks × 5 years = over 14,500 hours

Wow. Fourteen-thousand hours plus. But we also know that language acquisition isn't complete at age six. For example, the typical English-speaking child doesn't know passives yet (e.g., The *dog was chased by the boy*), and the Spanish-speaking child does not yet know the distribution of pronouns (e.g., when to say *él habla* versus *habla* for 'he speaks'). The Russian child may not have the entire case system yet. We could find examples in lots of different languages. But let's go back to the Spanish example for a moment.

Spanish allows both explicit and overt subject pronouns such as *él/ella* 'he/she' but also null or covert subject pronouns (i.e., just a verb). So both *él habla* and *habla* are grammatical renditions of 'he speaks.' However, they are not interchangeable in use. Spanish speakers prefer one or the other, depending on a variety of factors. The Spanish-

speaking child masters an adult-like distribution of these null and overt subject pronouns between ages 9 and 12!

This brief overview shows just how slow first language acquisition is. The same is true for second language acquisition. How long would it take the average second language learner to amass 14,500 hours of top-quality exposure to a second language like the six-year old in a first language situation? Years and years. Early research (some fifty years ago) by John Carroll showed that the best way to achieve the advanced level on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language's (ACTFL) proficiency scale was to study abroad for a full year after the initial stages of classroom learning. That research was conducted before learners had the access to the technology and social media that now keep them anchored in the first language while abroad. In other words, prior to current technology, the second language learner abroad would be truly immersed in the second language. To be sure, the ACTFL Advanced level of communicative ability is like being slightly beyond a five- to six-year old in terms of actual linguistic ability (not topic or content).

In addition to being slow, language acquisition is piecemeal: neither first nor second language learners get a "particular thing" all at once. For example, learners of both first and second languages don't first learn present tense, then past tense, then future tense. Instead, they start with no tense marking, get part of what it means to mark present tense while they are also learning to mark past tense, which in turn they only get partially. So while they are working on present tense marking they are also working on past tense marking. And somewhere along the line they initiate learning how to mark future time frame. (In a minute we will review stage-like behavior and this will make the piecemeal aspect of acquisition even clearer.)

In addition, all aspects of language are worked on simultaneously in small bits in language acquisition. While learning to mark tense, for example, learners are also working on the quality of vowels and consonants, syllable structure, sentence prosody (stress, rhythm, pitch), vocabulary, meaning, discourse (how sentences relate to each other in terms of meaning), and so on. In short, neither first or second language learners "master one thing" and then "move on to another."

Related to the slow and piecemeal nature of language acquisition is that **acquisition is stage-like** and follows a path not dictated by instruction or external forces. The two best-known examples are **morpheme orders** and **developmental sequences**.

Morpheme refers to "the smallest bit of language that carries meaning." The word *word* is a morpheme. It means, well, "word." *Wordless* consists of two morphemes: *word*, with its meaning, and *-less*, meaning "without." Here's another example. The verb *talk* is a morpheme that means "talk." *Talked* consists of two morphemes: *talk* and the inflection *-ed* that means "past time frame/prior to present." *Talking* also consists of two morphemes: *talk* and *–ing*, which means "in progress." *Dogs* consists of two morphemes as well: *dog* and *–s*, which means "more than one." Hopefully (three morphemes: *hope* + *ful* + *ly*) you get the

picture.

Research on both first and second language acquisition has shown that grammatical morphemes (verb endings, noun endings, articles, and so on) are acquired in a relatively fixed order over time. For example, in English for both first and second language learners, progressive *–ing* is acquired before past tense *–ed*, which in turn is acquired before third-person *–s*. This is true, whether you are raised in New York, Georgia, Hawaii, London, or Melbourne as a first-language learner. It's also true whether you're a second language learner and your first language is Spanish, Japanese or Turkish. And whether you learn in a classroom or "naturally" these morpheme orders are still found. Finally, if you learn in a classroom, these orders still appear no matter how and in what order they appear in textbooks and materials.

To be sure, a few scholars have claimed that some (not all) of this ordered development may be influenced by the first language. The jury is out on this, and so far the challenge has been limited to looking at two morphemes related to the noun, namely possessive *–s* ("dog's") and plural *–s* ("dogs") and only by Japanese learners. But no matter what, whether there is first language influence or not, there is ordered acquisition that instruction does not seem to overcome.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

That the acquisition of language is ordered and sequenced independently of instruction and other factors is one of the best-kept secrets in language teaching. Yet, the research on this started way back in the early 1970s! See if you can find a textbook on French, Spanish or any other language in which the preface mentions "ordered development." Good luck!

The term *developmental sequence* refers to how one particular structure or item is acquired over time. For instance, what is the developmental sequence over time for the acquisition of, say, negation in English? Even though the past tense *–ed* marker in English is acquired within a developmental order, how is this particular morpheme acquired over time? In Spanish, what is the developmental sequence for the acquisition of the copular (i.e., "linking") verbs *ser* and *estar* ('to be')? Let's look at this latter case to get a sense of a developmental sequence. Research has shown that learners' language develops in these stages for those verbs:

- **Stage 1:** No verb. Learners simply leave it out, as in *Juan alto* ('John tall') or *Mamá enferma* ('Mother sick').

- **Stage 2:** Emergence and use of *ser* for most contexts, as in *Juan es alto* but the non-native *Mamá es enferma* (it should be *Mamá está enferma*).

- **Stage 3:** Emergence and use of *estar* as an auxiliary for progressive. Here the learner moves from, say, *Juan es correr* or *Juan es corre* ('John is running') to *Juan está corriendo*.

- **Stage 4:** Emergence and use of *estar* as copular verb with location and adjectives: *Mamá está enferma* and *Mamá no está aquí* ('Mom is not here')

The learner may take years to traverse these stages, and within each stage we see variability; the learner doesn't get something all at once (see the discussion above about "slow and piecemeal"). During Stage 3, for example, the learner doesn't suddenly stop using *Juan es correr* and instead is 100% native-like with *Juan está corriendo*. The learner may use both forms. Sometimes it takes a while for the native-like structure or form to win out over the non-native structure. Moreover, instruction (trying to teach such structures and have learners practice them) doesn't mean learners still don't go through stages. Stage-like sequences seem to be universal. By the way, ordered development characterizes child first language acquisition as well.

Morpheme orders and developmental sequences point to another fact about language acquisition many teachers don't like to hear: **explicit instruction and practice in language does not alter the stage-like/developmental qualities of acquisition**. In other words, the effect of explicit instruction on acquisition of language itself is limited. To be sure, research is not clear on what instruction actually does, if anything. There are debates about whether it speeds up acquisition, but "faster" doesn't change the *quality* of acquisition. I can step on the gas pedal to make my car go faster but stepping on the gas pedal does not change my car from a fossil fuel burner to an electric vehicle or to a flying rocket. What is more, is it not clear whether instruction speeds up acquisition of the grammatical properties of language: as we saw in Chapter 2, language in your head is not what's on page 32 of the textbook.

> **"Language acquisition is slow, piecemeal, and stage-like—and follows a path not dictated by instruction or external forces."**

Some researchers believe instruction helps learners to "notice" things they might not notice on their own, but again, there is considerable debate on this and whether acquisition

ultimately involves any explicit processes on the part of the learner. As of the writing of this chapter, it is fair to say that scholars are converging on the idea that most if not all of language acquisition is implicit in nature. In the end, learners get language in their heads through interaction with the language in communicative contexts rather than through study and practice. Any role for explicit learning would be, at best, secondary to the primary process of implicit learning. We will expand on this a bit later when we talk about the role of input in acquisition.

Before proceeding, it is important to point out the kind of data researchers use. Research on ordered development, for example, is not based on what learners do when (1) they are taking a test, and (2) the test is about their knowledge of morphemes and structures. Instead, the research has always been based on oral production using spontaneous or elicited speech in which the learner is engaged in storytelling (e.g., looking at pictures or videos and telling someone what is happening). So, if you're a teacher and say, "No way! My students always show they've learned things when and in the way I've taught them," you are probably relying on data that second language researchers don't use.

Let's look at another important observation about language acquisition: **learners come to (implicitly) know more about language than they have been exposed to.** Here's a classic example we see in the literature on language and language acquisition. Everyone knows that in English we can contract *want to* to *wanna*, so that *I want to go* becomes *I wanna go*. Nobody needs to be taught this; we hear it all around us, both in first and second language acquisition, so it's easy to pick up. We can also say, *Where do you wanna go?* as well as *Who do you wanna invite to come along?* We do this constantly in everyday speech; second language learners do it as well. But note that we would never say, **Who do you wanna fire Susie at the meeting?* We must say, *Who do you want to fire Susie at the meeting?* or *Who do you wanta fire Susie at the meeting?* But notice that we can also contract *I* and *have* so that *I have done it* becomes *I've done it*. But we can't contract *Should I have done it*? to **Should I've done it?*

Clearly something allows contraction in some places but not in others. If you are a native or non-native speaker of English, did you ever learn this? Did anyone teach you? The answer is no. Could you have simply picked this up? The answer is, probably not. We can pick up only the possible things we hear. This means that if we rely only on the "data" we get from communicative interactions, all we hear (or see, in American Sign Language) are possible sentences.

So how do we come to know what is *not* possible? How do we come to know that contractions are not possible in some sentences as opposed to others? In short, our exposure is only to what is possible, and yet we have to "derive" what is impossible. How does that happen? (Do a Google search on contractions, and you'll see what people are actually taught about them. No way does what they are taught let them also know what they can't do!)

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Here's another place where contraction is constrained. We all say *gonna* for *going to*, as in, *I'm going to/gonna write a book on language teaching*. But none of us as first or second language speakers would ever say, *Next year I'm gonna the Bahamas for vacation*. We say, *I'm going to the Bahamas*. No one has ever told us we couldn't do this, and in fact we've never tried to do it! Oh, and this is cool: We know we can double-contract, as in *I would have done it* —> *I'd have done it* —> *I'd've done it* but not all the time.

Let's look at more examples. We all know we can combine *re-* with verbs to mean "do something again." We can say *paint* and *repaint*: J*ohn painted the kitchen. The colors didn't work out, so he repainted it*. There are many examples of this: *dial/redial, write/rewrite, do/redo*, and so on. But note that we can't use *re-* in the following examples: *The little girl petted the dog. When it wagged its tail, she repetted it*. Ugh, that sounds terrible—and so does the following: *My boss slept for an hour but was still tired after the nap, so he reslept for another hour*. (As I type this, my spell-checker is underlining *repetted* and *reslept*, trying to tell me something is wrong with these verbs.)

We know this about English. So do second language learners. Yet, nobody taught us. Again, we are only exposed to the possible combinations of *re-* and verbs. How do we "know" what the *impossible* combinations are? Clearly something happens in our mind/brains that organizes and constrains language without us simply learning this from the environment.

Although there are other things we could say about the acquisition of language, we will finish this section with something so obvious and empirically verified that it almost seems we shouldn't have to mention it: **Almost all L2 learners fall short of native-like competence and ability.** Time and time again we see that, no matter how good someone "sounds" with a second language, aspects of that person's linguistic system are non-native. And, as a population, second language learners fall on a large range of non-nativeness. So if we took 100 learners with the relatively same experience and time learning another language, we would find considerable variation in "how far" each person has gotten and "how good" that person is with the language.

The research is not clear on why non-nativeness seems to be the norm. Is it time on

task? Remember, we asked earlier how long it would take a second language learner to amass something like 14,500 good contact hours with language the way a six-year old first language learner does. Maybe people are non-native because they can't get the contact and quality of contact with language first-language learners can. Or maybe there's something about SLA that impedes complete acquisition. More on this later.

So, we are painting a picture of language acquisition with the following characteristics:

- It is slow.
- It is piecemeal.
- It is stage-like.
- Instruction does not significantly affect the first three characteristics.
- We come to have mental representation we couldn't learn from the environment.
- Some kind of non-nativeness appears to be the norm.

In other words, the "study + practice" and the "learn Chinese in 30 days" perspectives seem to miss the mark about the nature of SLA. Something is guiding and constraining acquisition. Acquisition seems to have its own agenda, proceeding along a path that is hard to alter or change substantially. The learner is apparently in much more control of the process than what teachers and lay people may want to admit—but we don't mean conscious control. Something *unconscious inside the learner* guides and constrains acquisition. What is this something?

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

If second language learners cannot become native-like, or seldom do, then why do so many people care about being native-like? Teachers and methods work at "correcting errors," and proficiency-tests often are normed to native-speaker baselines. What do you think about the following instead? The second language learner's job is not to be native-like, *but to be the best non-native he or she can be.*

Internal Factors

In the previous section we used the words "constrain" and "constraint" several times. Just what does it mean for something to *constrain* something else? A typical dictionary definition would be the following: to (severely) restrict its scope, extent, or activity, or to compel someone or something toward a particular course of action. From the brief overview of

major characteristics of language acquisition we saw in the first section, two things should be clear:

1. *Learners do not willy-nilly create linguistic systems in their heads in unique individual ways*. Across broad spectra of populations we see repeated patterns of development and universal tendencies in a linguistic system's growth in the mind/brain of a learner.

2. *Instruction doesn't override or circumvent these tendencies and developmental trajectories*. It's almost as if acquisition were immune to direct attempts to make it happen in certain ways.

So something is compelling acquisition toward a particular course of action. Something compels *ser* to be acquired before *estar* in Spanish as a second language. Something compels *–ing* to be acquired before past tense in English, and for past tense to be acquired before third-person *–s*. Something compels the learner's internal system to develop knowledge of ungrammaticality and impossibility, even in the absence of explicit knowledge about such things (e.g., the example on contractions). In short, **acquisition is constrained by internal factors**.

In this section, we will touch upon learner internal factors that constrain acquisition. By internal factors, we don't mean motivation and individual differences in learning rates or developmental paths (e.g., aptitude). Although such things might be important to language acquisition, they don't speak to constraints about developmental paths. In other words, something like motivation might tell me why Eric goes further in French than Mike, but it does little to tell me why both Eric and Mike demonstrate the same paths of development. Aptitude might (and I underscore *might*) tell me why Eric is faster at picking up some things compared to Mike when it comes to language, but it doesn't tell me why those things are ordered in particular ways for both learners. The kind of internal factors of concern to us here are related to the nature of language and any mechanisms responsible for learning.

First, let's talk about one theory that posits language is special, that it is not learned like anything else. This theory is Universal Grammar and the modularization of the human mind. We will call this UG for short. Here, in a nutshell, is the theory of UG:

- Language is unique to humans and, as such, is a result of genetic predisposition.

- There are universal properties of language that all human languages must obey.

- Languages, no matter what they are, are restricted to those properties provided by UG.

- The properties of language contained in UG are specific to language and are not shared by any other cognitive system (e.g., vision, reasoning). This is what we mean by

modularization (i.e., there is a special "module" in the human mind just for language).

To be sure, the word "properties" does not mean the kinds of things that most language learners and teachers think of. As we saw in Chapter 2, we are not talking about what teachers and learners find on page 32 of a textbook. Under the theory of UG, properties of language are abstract in nature. We saw, for example, that there is a technical and abstract definition for "subject of sentence." We hinted that, in Spanish, the case marker *a* is governed by some very abstract notions, such as definiteness, specificity, and animacy, among others. We saw how the choice of nominative versus non-nominative case in English is tied to some abstract notion of "finiteness" (tense) of sentences. Again, we're talking about here is not your everyday textbook notion of language.

> **"Language acquisition is constrained by internal factors related to the nature of language and the nature of learning mechanisms."**

We don't want to get mired down in the theory here because it is very technical. What is more, it's not necessary for practitioners to get into the nitty-gritty of the theory. That's what we have theoretical linguists for. For most language educators, it's enough to understand this: As the learner goes about creating a linguistic system, even if it is non-native in nature, that **linguistic system (mental representation) is constrained and guided by UG**. At every stage of development, UG is pushing and "coercing" the system to act like a natural human language, even if that language does not resemble a native-like system. This in turn means that what teachers (and, unfortunately, many researchers) like to call "errors" are also constrained: learners can only make "errors" that don't violate the properties and constraints of UG.

For example, the learner who says, "He take the bus everyday" instead of "He takes…" is not violating UG and the role of "agreement," because in English the verb *take* is featureless: it is without Tense, Person and Number. It is "bare." So it can be inserted into a sentence and not cause a problem, because there is no clash of features such as person and number between what the word contains and what the hidden functional aspects of the sentence expect. However, once the learner gets *takes* as a word and it has the features [3rd] and [-plural] embedded in it, that learner's system is barred from that verb appearing with any subject other than one that matches those features. For this reason, "errors" in ESL are almost universally "He take" but almost never "I takes" or "We takes." The research on both first and second language acquisition has documented that many "possible errors" never occur, suggesting that something is guiding the acquisition process.

The theory of UG also helps us to understand how people, including second language learners, come to know more about a language than what they were taught or exposed to.

Here's one example. Languages like Spanish and Turkish allow both null and overt subject pronouns. Thus, *él/ella habla* and *habla* are both possible in Spanish for 's/he speaks.' UG allows both null and overt subject pronouns as options.

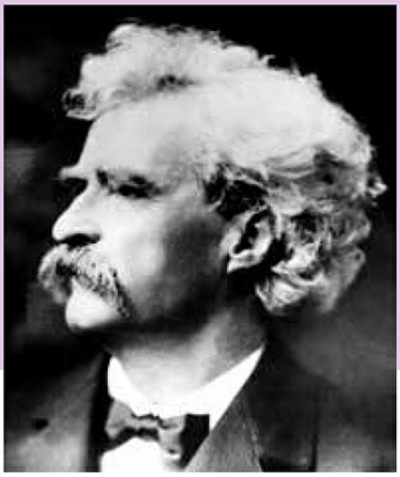
But here are two consequences UG requires: If your language allows null subjects like Spanish and Turkish, then overt subjects must have a referent or "antecedent," that is, refer to something previously mentioned or known to the speaker and listener. So, if I say *él habla*, you as the listener automatically interpret the *él* to refer to a specific male entity, say, my dog or my friend Daniel. You also know that if I say something like *me robaron* ('they robbed me'), I could mean that John and Harry broke into my house, or that I was robbed but don't know by whom. Thus, null subject pronouns don't require a referent or antecedent. But if I say, *Ellos me robaron*, you presume I'm talking about two or more male entities I can identify (e.g., Walter and Luca = *ellos* 'they'). This is because overt or explicit subject pronouns require an antecedent or referent in null subject languages. Once a learner's mental representation establishes that the language allows for null subjects, that system prohibits the use of explicit or overt subjects with no referent or antecedent, such as in weather expressions (e.g., *Está lloviendo*, not **Ello/Él está lloviendo* for 'It's raining'), telling time, (e.g., *Es la una*, not **Ello/Él es la una*, for 'It's one o'clock). So UG puts constraints on how null and overt subjects can behave regarding referents and antecedents.

Now, if you're learning a language like French or English that does not allow null subjects, you automatically come to know from UG that filler subjects are required in those instances in which Spanish and Turkish prohibit them, namely weather, time, and other expressions: *Il est une heure*, not **Est une heure*, for 'It's one o'clock'; *Il pleut*, not **Pleut*, for 'It's raining.' (Note: if you hear a non-native say something that sounds like *Is raining*, they are not making an "error" in syntax. They are likely struggling with a consonant cluster at the end of a syllable. That is, the combination of *t* + *s* after a vowel in the word *it's* may be difficult for some learners of English to pronounce. But in their minds it is, indeed, *it's*.)

The research on SLA shows that learners of null and non-null subject languages quickly demonstrate underlying knowledge (mental representation) for how subject pronouns work in their new language. No one has to teach them this, and the evidence is not provided in the language they hear or see around them. Again, UG gives this to us as a universal constraint or property of how sentential subjects behave and we don't have to learn it.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Universal Grammar is associated with the linguist Noam Chomsky. In theoretical circles, UG is a given, and linguists try to delineate its properties. Nonetheless, an article occasionally appears in a popular science or psychology magazine declaring UG is dead and linguists or psychologists have shown why. Not true. Within linguistics, UG is alive and well, just like Mark Twain back in 1897....



Not all aspects of language acquisition can be explained via UG, meaning not all are constrained by UG. Some properties of language are picked up through general learning mechanisms. These learning mechanisms are not specific to language and may be used to learn to write cursively, read, translate, design logos, memorize phone numbers and dress appropriately. One key feature of general learning mechanisms that has implications for language is the "frequency tabulator." When we learn things, we unconsciously weigh them due to the frequency with which we encounter them in our environment and with which we recall them. Things that are more frequently encountered are "more robustly represented" in our minds/brains; those less frequent things are less robust. (Other factors, of course, impact the role of frequency, but we are isolating frequency here to see how it works in the abstract.)

So, in language, the more frequently we hear or see a word, the more likely we are to pick it up and have it robustly represented in our minds/brains. For this reason, learners pick up certain irregular past-tense verbs very quickly in English as a first or second language (e.g., *went, ate*) compared to regular past-tense forms of verbs (e.g., *talked*). And the most frequent irregulars are picked up faster than the less frequent ones (e.g., *went* versus *drove, ate* versus *spent*).

For structural elements of a language, frequency and the frequency tabulator may affect the data that become available for UG. For example, present tense is much more frequent than past tense, which is much more frequent than future tense. In addition, certain forms of the present tense in some languages are more frequent than others. So it is not surprising that various verb forms of the present tense are acquired before various forms of the past

tense, with both emerging before various forms of the future tense. In short, UG and general learning mechanisms may work together in the creation of language in a learner's mind/brain.

A Note on the First Language

It might be surprising to hear that scholars debate the extent to which the first language gets in the way or helps the acquisition of a second language. And, of course, everyone who isn't a scholar of acquisition has an opinion about this—teachers, students, people on the street, news pundits.

If we assume that the first language "gets in the way" somehow, what does this mean for internal constraints on language? Not much, really. The constraints are still there, and acquisition still does what it does. However, unlike in first language acquisition, a first language may slow down the processes used by the second language learner's internal devices. Not much can be done about this. Instruction does not seem to overcome any effects of the first language on SLA, nor does the first language seem to push aside how UG and the general learning mechanisms work. At worst, a first language simply makes the process more inefficient than for a first language. Here's a metaphor to help understand what I mean. Imagine a forty-year old woman trying to step up onto a train. Like everyone, she fights gravity and lifts one leg before the other. Then she lifts the other leg, and so on, until she has ascended the three or four steps and is actually on the train. This is relatively "easy" with no luggage. Now imagine that forty-year old woman with two thirty-pound pieces of luggage getting on the train. She struggles, and it takes her longer. She may misstep at one point or stop and regain her balance. But she still must do what she does without the luggage: fight gravity, put one foot up, then the other, and so on. Having the luggage doesn't change what she has to do; it just makes the process harder. Well, the first language may be like those thirty-pound suitcases; it's **extra baggage during second language acquisition**.

You may have heard of something called the **critical period**. According to some scholars, once you hit a certain age, you don't acquire languages the way you do a first language. The mechanisms you used to acquire a first language are no longer available. However, the idea of a critical period has lost much support over the years. Although age is an important variable in language learning, scholars are less and less in agreement with the idea of a "cutoff" point at which language acquisition is not possible. Instead, most are now seeing that the well-worn mechanisms of the first language may make SLA more difficult (i.e., the "extra baggage" we talked about earlier). In fact, the evidence is overwhelming that second language learners' mental representation is guided and constrained as in first language acquisition, and by the same mechanisms.

In sum, internal to the learner and not under the control of external forces are language-related and learning-related factors that guide and constrain the progress of development.

The learner's language looks the way it does at particular times during acquisition for a reason. It's not because learners are lazy, haven't memorized something, or haven't had enough "practice." It's because powerful internal forces are at work to process, organize and store the "data" that learners are exposed to.

But what does it mean to be "exposed to" something? Repeatedly I have discussed "the environment" and the "communicative context." What is in this environment or communicative context that forms part of the acquisition process? This is the focus of the next section.

External Factors

Before the 1970s, almost everyone believed that learners acquired language through study, memorization, rote practice, and purposeful intervention from teachers. Some people still believe this. However, a major discovery of second language research in the 1970s was the critical role of **input**, or **language that learners hear or see in a communicative context**; that is, language that learners are exposed to that they process for meaning (i.e., the job of the learner is to comprehend a message that is said/signed/written to them).

This definition rules out examples of language the teacher puts on display (e.g., "Here's what a question looks like: *Where do you study?*"), examples of language for repetition (e.g., "Repeat after me: *Where do you study?*"), and any other instances of language that are not intended to communicate a message (e.g., I can repeat after you without understanding what I'm repeating, because the purpose of what you're saying is not to express any meaning and my purpose in repeating is not to comprehend but to simply repeat). Instead, examples of input include asking someone, "Where do you study?" and expecting that person to answer with where he or she studies (because presumably you're talking about study habits) or telling someone, "Well, I like to study in the library. It's quiet there," to show distinction to what the other person just said.

In short, input is not about the language itself but about meaning embedded in communicative events. Importantly, input is not just a classroom phenomenon; it is a phenomenon of language acquisition in all contexts at all ages. The first language learner receives input from parents, other siblings, caretakers, *Sesame Street*, and other external sources. A second language learner can receive input from a movie, an online chat partner, a teacher who tells good stories in the classroom or holds real conversations with the students, among other sources. As long as the purpose of the first or second language learner is to understand a message, then the language the learner is exposed to qualifies as input.

In a certain sense, then, **language acquisition is a byproduct of learners attempting to comprehend language during communication**. This is as true for SLA as it is for first language acquisition. This, of course, does not mean that comprehension guarantees acquisition. Nothing does. It simply means that comprehension of language is a *requirement* for acquisition. In the next chapter we will explore just how the teacher can affect

acquisition positively and why the classroom environment is critical for beginning and intermediate learners.

Why input, and not study + practice? Why is input so important? The answer is simple: **UG and the general learning mechanisms can operate only on data contained in input**. (This is what we mean by modularized.) When you go to the supermarket checkout, you have to use a scanning device; you swipe a product over the scanner, and the computer registers the price. But what are you actually swiping? Not the picture of the product. Not the name on the can or package. Not the ingredients. What the scanner can read, and the only data the computer can make use of, is the bar code. That is, the system is modularized so that the only input that works at the checkout scanner is the bar code.

Well, acquisition is like this checkout scenario. Communicative input is the bar code for the internal mechanisms that guide language acquisition. They can't make use of anything else, because they aren't biologically engineered for anything else. Just as your eyes can make use of only light waves, not sound waves, your internal language making mechanisms can only make use of input embedded in some kind of meaning-making, that is, language you are attempting to comprehend for its message. This situation is as true for SLA as it is for first language acquisition.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

The role of input in SLA is often credited to Stephen Krashen. Although Krashen popularized the notion of *comprehensible* input (more on that later and in another chapter), the idea of communicative input has been around longer, and began with first language acquisition. What Krashen distilled for many people, and in a very succinct way, is this: acquisition happens only through understanding messages. In short, acquisition is a byproduct of comprehension, as noted above. What do you think of this shorthand way of talking about acquisition?

Given the central role of input in acquisition, an important external constraint on language

acquisition is **the quantity of input a learner receives**. How much class time does the learner actually spend comprehending messages? How much time during out-of-class work does the learner spend comprehending messages? Does the learner have access to input outside of class and make use of it? Learners with greater exposure to input have increased opportunities for acquisition. We have repeatedly seen this in the research on language acquisition. For example, this is why study abroad often significantly affects acquisition; it gives the learner massive amounts of input, assuming that learner actually spends most of the time in the L2 and avoids L1 situations as much as possible (i.e., is not social networking with family and friends at home and is not on the Internet looking at things in the L1). This is why immersion programs show greater overall results than traditional "hour per week" programs. Such programs provide much more input to learners.

Sometimes teachers ask me, "How much input is enough?" There is no answer. Some things make it into the system easily, while others require hundreds or thousands of examples in the input. So teachers should not expect learners to "get it" (whatever "it" is) after several or even several dozen instances in the input. Remember one of the characteristics of acquisition from this chapter's first section: **acquisition is slow and piecemeal**.

In addition, lurking behind the quantity issue is the quality of input learners receive. What constitutes "good input"? First, good input must be comprehensible. If the learner's job is to interpret a message, enough of it must be understood by its recipient(s) so acquisition can proceed. Incomprehensible language is just noise. I can turn on a Japanese program right now and sit in front of the TV for an hour trying to figure out what is happening. But almost 100% of that Japanese will just pass me by. How input can be made comprehensible to second language learners is the focus of another chapter.

> **"In a sense, then, what this all means is that language acquisition is a byproduct of learners attempting to comprehend language during communication."**

Good input must also be engaging and important so the learner has a reason to pay attention to the message. Recall from Chapter 1 that communication always has a purpose. People interpret (comprehend) meaning for a reason. The same is true of input in acquisition. Input could be comprehensible, but if it is not part of a communicative event in which the learner has some involvement, it lacks purpose. And if learners aren't paying attention to the message, even if the input is comprehensible, acquisition ain't gonna happen.

We now come to another external constraint on acquisition: **Interaction**, or the expression and interpretation of meaning and how people negotiate meaning during a communicative event. Research has suggested that input that is part of interaction may be

better than input that is not. That is, **input is better when someone is talking *with* a learner, not *at* a learner**. Learner engagement with another person causes the input to be adjusted and negotiated so more comprehension occurs. (Again, we will see how this works in a classroom in the next chapter.) Here is an example from a study Alison Mackey published in 1999:

SPEAKER: There's a pair of reading glasses above the plant.
LEARNER: A what?
SPEAKER: Glasses, reading glasses, to see the newspaper?
LEARNER: Glassi?
SPEAKER: You wear them to see with, if you can't see. Reading glasses.
LEARNER: Ahh, ahh, glasses to read, you say reading glasses.
SPEAKER: Yeah.

In this scenario, the learner doesn't understand what reading glasses are. Negotiation ensues, and in the second-to-last line of the interchange the learner has a "eureka!" moment.

Under some accounts, interaction may help bring an aspect of language into the learner's focus. Accordingly, this may help the learner "notice" that aspect and push its acquisition along. Here is an example I've used from my many eavesdropping experiences. Tom is a native speaker, and Don is a non-native speaker. They are in a locker room after a doubles tennis match. Don's regular partner was absent, so Tom asks of his whereabouts.

TOM: So, where's Dave?
DON: He vacation.
TOM: [showing some surprise] He's on vacation?
DON: Yes. On vacation.
TOM: Lucky guy.

In this interchange, when Tom shows surprise at the reason for Dave's absence, he repeats what Don says, albeit it in a native-like manner. Don "notices" the preposition *on* and uses it himself when he verifies that, yes, indeed, that is the reason why Dave is not there. Some scholars believe that Don's "noticing" of the preposition may help him to acquire it—not immediately, but with repeated exposure in the input. He has become aware of "on vacation" now. So, according to this perspective on interaction, "stuff in the input" may become more salient to learners as they actively negotiate a conversation.

There is debate about the extent to which noticing and salience affect language acquisition, so, for now, we'll just leave what we've said so far as is. However, something important to touch on here is the nature of interaction. **Interaction does not necessarily**

mean the learner is talking. It can also mean that the learner indicates engagement with the input in some other way. This could be a head nod, a simple *yes* or *no*, a gesture of thumbs up or down, a "Huh?" look on the face. In short, the learner can interact nonverbally as well as verbally. (We'll get into what I call "level-appropriate" interaction in the next chapter.)

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

How many times has someone looked at you and, without you saying a word, said "Are you listening to me?" What aspect of your not speaking gives clues to the other person that you are not engaged and/or not getting what he or she is saying?

Implications for Language Teaching

The first implication of research on language acquisition for language teaching should be clear:

The effects of explicit teaching and practice with language are severely limited. Instruction should focus on things that foster acquisition.

Research on the internal constraints on acquisition undermine many people's notions that the way to learn a language is through study + practice. Memorizing words, studying grammar, filling in blanks, repeating after someone, forcing the use of a structure to ensure it's learned—none of these (nor others) carry much weight regarding how a language gets inside someone's head.

That the effects of explicit instruction and practice are limited is bolstered by the ideas in Chapter 2: **Language is too abstract and complex to be taught and learned explicitly**. If what you are learning and practicing is not what winds up in your head anyway, then what are your efforts for? Just as important, however, is that the bulk of research on the effects of explicit instruction has supported the hypothesis that such instruction has little to no effect on underlying acquisitional processes. Because explicit acquisition is constrained, instruction

appears constrained as well. (We will touch on this in a later chapter on what is called "focus on form.")

A follow-up to the first implication is:

We should work with the learner's natural acquisition processes, not against them.

This statement suggests that, when teachers understand how language acquisition happens, they can make better choices about methods, techniques, materials, and other curricular matters. For example, one question I often get from teachers is, "What should I do about errors?" My response surprises many: In acquisition, there is no such thing as an error. The learner's internal system is what it is. When learners do something not native-like, we call it an error only because we are looking at it from the outside and comparing it to something else. But, internally, the system is at a particular stage and, from what we know, doesn't respond well to error correction, because correction and explicit learning are not what feeds the system.

Input is the data the internal mechanisms need, as it is defined by acquisition: language that learners hear or see in some communicative context to which they respond for the message it contains. The more we know about acquisition, the more we can figure out why some things we do in language instruction don't work and other things (may) work better.

By the way, you might think that, because acquisition is ordered, then maybe an implication should be that we teach according to the ordered development. Not so. Why? Because, even though ordered development is remarkably similar across learners, individual acquisition rates vary: Suzie might be faster at acquisition than Toni. To anchor Suzie (and Toni, for that matter) to a syllabus based on ordered development is as problematic as traditional syllabi, because somebody is going to be "ahead," someone "behind," and someone "right where he or she should be." Once again, we're trying to strap learners into something predetermined.

Another implication for language teaching in this chapter is:

We must educate students, parents, colleagues, and administrators about the nature of acquisition (as well as the nature of language and communication).

In trying to develop contemporary communicative and proficiency-oriented language curricula, many teachers run into trouble: Students, colleagues, and others think they know as much about language, communication, and acquisition as the teacher! This may be so if the teacher has no foundation in these areas. But a teacher who does have the foundation can and must educate others so that they understand why the communicative and proficiency-oriented classroom looks so different from other classes (e.g., history, psychology, math). Knowledge of acquisition helps teachers become advocates for a more appropriate curriculum designed to develop communicative ability.

We will close this chapter with perhaps the most important implication for language teaching:

Classrooms and materials need to be spaces in which learners receive lots of input and have many chances to interact with it.

Given that explicit teaching and practice are not ways to foster communicative ability and help learners create language in the mind/brain, access to input becomes critical. Thus, the language instructor is the learner's initial and sometimes sole contact with the kind of data needed to acquire language. The instructor thus becomes for the second language learner what parents and caretakers are for the first language learner: the main source of communicatively embedded input.

Acquisition research has helped to define and reshape the role of the language teacher. Although no longer teaching and testing in a traditional sense, the contemporary language teacher is the springboard for the learner's long venture into language acquisition. Like children learning a first language who need to hear (and/or see) someone using language with them, classroom students need someone to use language with them. The instructor, then, becomes a central component of the learner's experience.

Foundational Readings

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Discussion Questions and Food for Thought

1. Review the chapter and make a list of all bolded or italicized words (except non-English words), terms and concepts. Can you define each one or explain what it means? Can you give examples of your definitions?
2. Read the VanPatten and Rothman chapter, "Against 'Rules'" (see **Foundational**

Readings), in which they discuss three aspects of language:

   a. aspects that cannot be learned
   b. aspects that are derived and not learned
   c. aspects that must be learned from the input

   Summarize and present these three aspects of language to others.

3. Research on first language acquisition has shown that parents and others do not respond to the non-native-like utterances of children as "errors" but instead only engage the content or message. That is, children are not corrected for how they say something. This is exemplified in the following interaction with a 2-year-old:

   PARENT: Here. Take this one.
   CHILD: No! No take! Mine! ['No! I won't take it. I want mine!']
   PARENT: But I don't know where yours is!

   However, in second language teaching, teachers often wonder, if not worry, about how to correct "errors." Why do you think we are not concerned with children's first language utterances that are non-native but are preoccupied with second language learners' non-native utterances? What does the preoccupation with "correcting errors" suggest about underlying beliefs about language and language acquisition? Where do those beliefs come from?

4. Interview ten students and ask them to answer the following questions:

   a. How do you think languages are learned?
   b. Is second language learning different from learning a first language?
   c. If you've taken a language, what has worked for you, and what hasn't?

   What ideas emerge from their responses? How do these dovetail with any of the ideas presented in this chapter?

5. In this chapter we focused on the acquisition of language, defining "language" as mental representation. But what of the acquisition of communicative ability? How do learners acquire the ability to express and interpret meaning in a given context? Which of the following seems plausible to you?

   a. Second language learners develop communication by engaging in communicative events.
   b. Second language learners develop communication through focused practice.

6. Many commercial companies produce materials for language learning for individuals (e.g., Rosetta Stone, Pimsleur, Duolingo). Select one and scrutinize its website for what it says about language acquisition. Share your observations with others.

7. Make a list of at least five things you learned in this chapter that you did not know before. Alternatively, the list can be at least five things you had not considered before. Present your list to others, explaining what has changed about your thinking, or at least what you are considering now that you hadn't considered previously.

8. A typical statement people make about children learning a first language, as well as second language learners immersed in a second language environment, is that these learners "absorb" the language. Can you explain why "absorb" is not a good metaphor based on the ideas presented in this chapter? What metaphor or term do you think is appropriate for language acquisition?

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I can list the basic characteristics of language acquisition.	○	○	○
2. I understand that language acquisition is constrained.	○	○	○
3. I can describe the two major types of constraints: internal and external.	○	○	○
4. I understand that instruction cannot alter acquisition processes.	○	○	○
5. I can offer examples of linguistic development over time.	○	○	○

CLT PRINCIPLE

Instructors and Materials Should Provide Appropriate Level Input (and Interaction)

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I can offer a definition of "input" and give examples.	○	○	○
2. I understand the role of the instructor as "input provider" in language acquisition.	○	○	○
3. I can describe how to make input comprehensible.	○	○	○
4. I understand that input is not a technique, but is foundational to the communicative curriculum.	○	○	○
5. I understand the difference between talking "at" and talking "with" learners.	○	○	○

The principle at the center of this chapter concerns what instructors do in classrooms and what learners get exposed to:

One of the principal jobs of instructors and their materials is to provide appropriate level input for learners, as well as appropriate level interaction with that input.

We will explore in this chapter:

- *A review/an overview of the nature of input.*
- *How input is made comprehensible to learners.*
- *The nature of interaction.*
- *How input relates to the broader notion of communication.*

Input in Communicative Language

"Input" is one of those everyday, ubiquitous terms. We hear or see it in all kinds of contexts:

"I could use your input on this matter. Do you have a few moments to chat?"

"Remember, the white plug is for the input, and the red plug is for the output. Otherwise, the sound won't come through."

"Go ahead and input the data. Let's see what we get."

For those of us in SLA, this is unfortunate, because input does not have multiple meanings or uses regarding how learners create a mental representation of language. In fact, the definition of input rules out what many teachers, students, parents, principals, administrators, and others deem necessary for language learning. So what does input mean in the context of learning languages?

You may remember from Chapter 3 that **input is language that learners hear or see in a communicative context** and try to comprehend for the message contained in it. When I hear in French, *"D'où êtes vous?"* ('Where are you from?'), my focus is on what the person is asking me, and my response is, *"De la Californie"* ('From California'), because that is what the person wants to know. The question addressed to me is input, because I'm attending to the message or the meaning. Let's suppose the other person then says, *"Ah. Mais vous vous trouvez loin de chez vous."* ('Ah. You are a long way from home.') My response might be *"Oui, mais je vais retourner…"* ('Yes, but I'm going to go back…') Again, my response is what it is, because I'm focused on the meaning contained in what the person says. Once more, that person's statement is input for me, because I'm focused on the message in the statement.

Let's contrast the above with the following scenario. My French teacher tells me to repeat after him: *"Je me trouve loin de chez moi."* I do as instructed, and I repeat. What that teacher says is not input, because I'm not focused on the meaning. In fact, I don't really have to know what the teacher is saying, because that's not what is asked of me. I can repeat without knowing what my teacher says. What if he threw in some nonsense words such as *"Je me cave boudou de chez moi"* and asked me to repeat? I could perform the exercise, because my focus is not on meaning. I simply have to repeat what I hear.

Now, let's imagine one more scenario. My teacher of French says, "The verb *trouver* normally means 'to find,' but in the pronominal form *se trouver* it means to find yourself in the sense of being located somewhere or being in some situation." Thank you very much, Madame, for explaining the difference between *trouver* and *se trouver* to me. I am hearing *about* these verbs, but I am not hearing them directed to me in a sentence I am supposed to comprehend and respond to for its message.

The point of these scenarios is to demonstrate that only the first exemplifies what input is in acquisition: language embedded in a communicative context the learner attends to for its meaning. In the latter two situations, either I don't have to attend to meaning, or there is no meaning to attend to because no message was communicated to me in the second

language! So neither of these two scenarios has language that qualifies as input under the definition we use in language acquisition. Again, input means one and only one thing in language acquisition. It can't mean something else, no matter what teachers, students, or any one else wants it to mean.

Why do we have a restricted definition of input in SLA? As we saw in Chapter 3, the only way a linguistic system builds up in the mind/brain of the learner is through exposure to input. This is because the mechanisms inside the head that process, store, and create language can operate on only a certain kind of data: language embedded in some kind of communicative event. They are not engineered to operate on language I'm supposed to repeat or to which I don't have to pay attention to meaning. They are not engineered to operate on explanations about language. They can operate only on input as it is defined here. In short, we are hardwired in language acquisition for a particular kind of data.

But, as mentioned in Chapter 3, there is the issue of not only **quantity of input** (how much exposure to input in communicative contexts the learner gets), but also the **quality of that input**. By quality we mean two things:

1. whether input is **level appropriate**;
2. whether learners are **engaged with the input** (interacting with it).

> **"Input means one and only one thing in language acquisition: language embedded in a communicative event that the learner attends to for its meaning."**

Level Appropriateness

In discussing level appropriateness, we ask: Can the learners comprehend what is being said without struggling too much? To be sure, no learner comprehends 100% of what is said, but if the input is incomprehensible, problems arise. One is that the learner cannot attach meaning to the speech stream (or signing, or words on the page), so the internal mechanisms have no data on which to operate. Language is simply noise (or gestures, or letters/characters on a page). What has to happen during acquisition is this: the consistent **mapping of meaning onto input sentences during comprehension**. This mapping is largely unconscious, of course; otherwise, comprehension would come to a screeching halt. We will detail level appropriateness in a minute.

Learner Engagement

That learners acquire language through comprehension doesn't mean they are passive little sponges that simply "absorb" language. As we saw in Chapter 3, the "absorption" metaphor doesn't catch the active unconscious processes that shape language in every learner's

mind/brain. But, in addition to having active little brains that process, organize, and store linguistic data, learners must actively participate in events in which they receive input. Instructors can't just "throw input" at learners; they must structure activities and tasks such that learners constantly indicate comprehension and react to messages they hear.

Let's start with two scenarios of child L1 acquisition as examples of what we mean. Parents talk to children expecting some kind of response—even if it's a giggle or a smile. In the first scenario, a parent is "playing body parts" with a nine-month old during diaper changing.

PARENT: Ok. Where are your eyes? [touches the child's eyes] There are your eyes!
CHILD: [squirms and giggles]
PARENT: Where's your nose? [touches the child's nose] Yep. There's your nose. I'm gonna kiss your nose! [kisses the nose]
CHILD: [squeals and laughs]
PARENT: Let me see your ears. Where are your ears? [gently rubs both earlobes on the child] There they are! There are your ears!
CHILD: [moves arms and giggles]

Let's examine this interchange looking at both comprehensibility and engagement. Did you notice:

- the short sentences?
- the repetition of words?
- the focus on the here and now and the use of gestures?

All of these things (and others) work together to make the language level appropriate for the child. At the same time, did you notice that the child didn't say anything? That's because the child is not at a point in development at which she can do that. But that doesn't mean she can't participate in "the game." By giggling, squealing, moving her arms, and so on, the child indicates she is engaged with the input. She is actively working at comprehension, and the parent expects this. If the parent were talking "at" the child, that parent would have a pointer and a flip chart with body parts and would stand away form the child, pointing and saying, "Today we are going to learn where our body parts are. First, let's locate the eyes. Next, let's see where the ears are. Next comes the nose and that is right here." Instead, the parent talks "with" the child. And the child responds.

In the second scenario, the same child is a bit older and has recently begun to walk. The parent and the child are on a plane together, and the child has gotten down from the parent's lap and takes a step away.

PARENT: [reaching for the child's hand] Where're you going?

CHILD: Da!

PARENT: Where? You're going where?

CHILD: Da!

PARENT: Honey. I don't know where you're going. Where are you going?

CHILD: [pointing toward the first-class divider] Da!

PARENT: Oh! You're going there!

As in the previous interchange, the parent uses language that is level appropriate for the child. How odd it would be for the parent to speak to the child like this: "Tammy, as I explained to you several times, keep the aisle clear and stay close to me. Otherwise you will get run over by a beverage cart, and there is no emergency room on this plane." Aside from its silly content, the language is pitched too high for the child's comprehension. Regarding engagement, did you notice that, in this interchange, the child can produce one-word statements? To be sure, the child's use of *there* comes out as *da*, and it takes the parent a few lines to realize this. Yet the child responds and is engaged with the input, not sitting there like a zombie while the parent drones on and on.

Like children learning a first language, second language learners—no matter their ages—have to get language that is level appropriate and they must be actively engaged with the input. They can't just sit there and be "talked at." With this said, now let's get into some detail about level appropriateness.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Many teachers expect their students to speak in complete sentences during class. Why do teachers, but not parents, expect this, as the examples in this section show? Do parents know something that teachers don't, or vice versa? Teachers tend to operate under the idea that you have to speak in order to learn. And the yardstick of language teaching is what learners can say, of course. But what can the beginning learner actually say? And, in communication, is a complete sentence always necessary? What if you are asked a *yes/no* question? (Time to go back to Chapters 1 and 3.)

How Input is Comprehensible

As we said above, input must be comprehensible. Many novice instructors freak out when

they hear that they are supposed to use the second language from the get-go: "How do you talk in the second language if they don't know anything?" The answer is, the same way you talk to a child who doesn't know anything!

What does beginning-level input look like? First, it is *not* like language used between native speakers. Nor is it like the language the learners' instructor might use with other proficient speakers. Here's a sample from the first few minutes of the first day of a modern language class. (You can translate the English into the language you teach so you can visualize how the teacher is interacting and using appropriate level input.)

TEACHER: [approaches student] Hi. My name is Prof. VanPatten. What's your name?
STUDENT: [blank stare]
TEACHER: What's your name? Are you Robert? Are you Mark? What's your name?
STUDENT: Oh, uh, Anthony.
TEACHER: Great. Thank you, Anthony. [to another student] Hi. My name is Prof. VanPatten. What's your name?
STUDENT: Uh, Brittany.
TEACHER: Great. [to class] Class, here are two students. His name is Anthony. Her name is Brittany. Who else is in this class? [to a third student] Hi. I'm Prof. VanPatten. What's your name?
STUDENT: Jacob. Well, Jake.
TEACHER: Your name is Jake?
STUDENT: [nods]
TEACHER: Terrific. Class, here is another student. His name is Jake. [to a fourth student] And what's your name?
STUDENT: Erin.
TEACHER: Erin. My name is Prof. VanPatten. OK, Class. This is Erin. [pointing to Jake] Is his name Jake or Anthony. [class shouts out "Jake!"] Correct. [pointing to Anthony] So, what's his name? [class shouts out, "Anthony!"] Good memory. And her? [pointing to Brittany] What's her name? [several people shout out, "Brittany!"] Is that correct? Is your name Brittany? [Brittany nods] Then, what's her name [pointing to Erin]?

> **"Students do not sit in class like little sponges. The teacher talks with students, not at them. Students are engaged from the beginning."**

Let's compare this interchange with the one in which the parent is playing "Where's your…?" with the child. Do you see any similarities? You should see that the teacher, like the parent, knows the students cannot say anything, so the teacher asks of students only

things they can do. Like the parent, the teacher uses short sentences, lots of repetition, rephrasing—and, when the first student has no idea what the teacher is saying, the teacher uses examples to coax the student's name out of him. While students may not understand what they are hearing at first, the teacher rapidly moves them into the realm of overall comprehension.

At the same time, did you see that, just as in the scene between the parent and child, the students are not sitting there like little sponges? The teacher is talking *with* them, not at them. They are engaged from the outset. The teacher knows that the students can say their own names. So that is where he begins the first interaction.

So here are three features that help to make input comprehensible to the beginner (and also for the intermediate learner):

- **short sentences**
- **repetition**
- **rephrasing**

Did you notice that this interchange has something else in common with the parent-child scenario? There is also a focus on the here-and-now so that the language is maximally embedded in content the students can see right before them. The teacher isn't talking about politics, music, or climate change. The teacher is focused on one thing: getting everyone's name out so students can know each other. Thus, a fourth feature that makes input comprehensible is:

- **content is clear**

Can students understand every single word and phrase they hear? No. At this stage it is sufficient for them to map overall meaning onto strings of words they hear. As they continue to engage with the input, words and aspects of language will "emerge" from it —or better, students will begin to process individual words and aspects of language in the input. So something like "What's your name?" may at first be processed by the learner as one big chunk. The learner knows what it means and can respond but may not have identified all of its parts. That's the way language acquisition proceeds: in bits and pieces (see Chapter 3). After some time with the input, the learner will begin to isolate individual words, and the language-making mechanisms inside the mind/brain will begin to see how these words "combine" to make meaning.

Here is an exchange that happened recently in a first-semester Spanish class (month three) when I was substituting for an instructor in my program. After a brief five-minute presentation about my parents, sister and dog, I started the presentation. I used PowerPoint slides that employed animation and other embedded features to reveal information as we went along and to hide it at key points. (Note: Before starting the

presentation, I stated its outcome: “After this presentation, you will be able to say ten things about my family.”)

OK, Clase. Ahora vamos a ver más miembros de mi familia. [PowerPoint slide reveals lines that go from parents to grandparents]

Vamos a hablar de mis abuelos [tombstone and name of my paternal grandfather revealed]. *Aquí está mi abuelo paterno. Se llama Dick. Dick es mi abuelo paterno.*

[tombstone and name of my paternal grandmother revealed] *Aquí está mi abuela paterna. Se llama Birgit. Entonces, Dick es mi abuelo paterno…y Birgit es mi abuela materna.*

[pointing to Dick’s tombstone] *Dick ya murió. No vive más.*

[pointing to Birgit’s tombstone] *Birgit también murió. No vive más.*

[slide goes blank] *OK. ¿Tienen buena memoria? ¿Cómo se llama mi abuelo paterno?* [class shouts out *“Dick”*] *¿Y mi abuela materna? ¿Cómo se llama?* [class shouts out *“Birgit”*] *¿Quién murió ya? ¿Mi abuelo Dick murió? ¿Mi abuela Birgit murió? O murieron ya los dos abuelos?* [class shouts out, *“¡Los dos!”*] *Sí, tienen muy buena memoria.*

[to a particular student] *¿Cómo se llama tu abuelo paterno?* [student mistakenly says, *“Dick”*] *¿Tu abuelo paterno se llama Dick?* [student realizes mistake and says, *“Uh, no. Se llama Patrick.”*] *Ah, Ok. Tu abuelo paterno se llama Patrick. ¿Dónde vive? ¿O es que ya murió? [“Uh, no. No murió. Uh viva-vive en Tampa.”*] *¿Tu abuelo vive en la Florida? [“¡Sí!”*] *Wow.*

¿Otro abuelo vive en la Florida? [students look around, no one says ‘yes’] *¿Todos los abuelos viven en Michigan?* [many students nod, a few students shake their heads]

[to one particular student] *¿Dónde viven tus abuelos paternos? [“Uh, mi abuela, uh, vive en Flint. Pero mi abuelo, uh, mi abuelo mu-mu-*”] *¿Murió? [“Sí. Murió.”*] *Ah qué lástima. Lo siento…*

Ahora vamos a ver mi familia materna… [begins the process again with his Mexican grandparents on his mother’s side]

The presentation continued as I spoke of my maternal grandparents, my mother, her thirteen brothers and sisters, my favorite aunt and uncle, how the three people in my family

born on June 24 were all named after Saint John (Juan 1, Juanita-my mother, Juan 2), how they all died of cancer, and other interesting tidbits.

Now, let's look at this "presentation" as input. What makes it appropriate for this third-month Spanish 1 class? What makes it comprehensible? Again, note the use of short sentences. What is more, as the scene unfolded in real time, I used pauses at appropriate points to allow for "processing time" for these beginners. For example. Here's one of the opening sentences with the pauses indicated:

Aquí está [slight pause] *mi abuelo paterno.* [slight pause] *Se llama* [slight pause] *Dick. Dick* [slight pause] *es mi abuelo* [slight pause] *paterno.*

At the same time, I was not speaking at the rate I would normally use with other native speakers or proficient users. So here are two other characteristics of input that help to make it comprehensible for beginners and intermediate learners:

- **slow(er) rate**
- **pausing at appropriate places**

In addition to short sentences, pausing, and slower rate, I used repetition of words and phrases. Why is repetition in the input important? It adds to the frequency needed to build up mental representation of words and phrases (how they sound, how they work with each other, what they mean). (You may want to refresh you memory with Chapter 3's discussion of the internal "frequency tabulator.") Rephrasing was also present, which in turn increases frequency in the input.

Did you also notice that, after my initial presentation of my paternal grandparents, I went to a "memory quiz"? This was part of the process of talking *with* students, not at them. The more an instructor involves students during presentations, the more they pay attention. The more they pay attention, the more they comprehend. The more they comprehend, the greater the influence on acquisition is. One final thing: Did you notice that after the memory quiz I began to ask students about their own paternal grandparents? Once again, this is an example of talking *with* students, not at them.

This leads us to another major feature of input in the classroom:

- **learner engagement with the input**

Students do not just sit there; they are constantly involved in the presentation and discussion of content. And as a reminder, the input is anchored in something concrete: clear content. Via PowerPoint slides and visuals, the input is grounded in a "here and now," even though my grandparents and aunts and uncles aren't in the room.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Some people talk of "compelling" input: it must be interesting to the learner. But "compelling" is in the eye of the beholder. Some readers might say, "What's so interesting about your family?" Well, interest sometimes lies in not just the content, but also how you deliver it. I have joked that I could make the labels on cans interesting in my Spanish class. And I can. I am a real actor and comedian in my class. So compelling input from me might be different from compelling input from someone else. And a dull person can make any input dull. Furthermore, content must be age- and context-appropriate (see Chapter 1 on communication).

You might be thinking, "Wow! This is remarkably similar to how parents talk to children during first language acquisition." You'd be right, too! I now invite you to compare side-by-side the interchanges between the parents and children with the interchange between me and the beginning Spanish class. You will see the following elements of comprehensible input common to both:

- short sentences
- slower pace
- appropriate pausing
- repetition
- rephrasing
- concrete/here and now (content is clear)
- learner involvement/engagement

As learners progress, instructors naturally shift the input to be level-appropriate. For example, at the same time I substituted for the Spanish class above, I was teaching my own third-year conversation course. The language I used in it was different from the one I used in the beginning Spanish class. An example follows. (After initial questions, I would introduce the *palabra del día*, or 'word of the day.' The first student who used the word in a sentence appropriately during class to talk about whatever we were discussing won a prize.)

OK, Clase. Como siempre, tenemos una palabra del día. Hoy, la palabra es 'conozco.'

[PowerPoint slide reveals the word of the day] *Vamos a ver unos ejemplos. Listos?*

[reveals two examples and reviews them with students] *El primer ejemplo es este: "Conozco muy bien a mi hermana, como la palma de mi mano." ¿Conocen esta expresión?* [points to *como la palma de mi mano*, students shake heads] *Es como "like the back of my hand" en inglés. Pero en español decimos palma* [pointing to palm of hand]

Ok. Aquí está el segundo ejemplo: "No conozco Detroit. ¿Cómo es?" ¿Alguien en la clase conoce Detroit? [several students say yes] *Ok, Cam. Dime. ¿Por qué conoces Detroit? ["Porque uh mi familia y yo vamos mucho a Detroit. Cuando yo era niño"] Ah. OK.*

There is less repetition here, and there is movement away from the concrete. That is, talking about being familiar with a city is not the same as presenting someone's family tree with a visual. However, the content is clear, so students can anchor the input into something they already know, thus can follow along. The speed of this written presentation is closer to that which I use with other Spanish speakers, and pausing occurs only when I wait for a student response. These differences between beginning input and this more advanced input are directly based on my perception of the students' level and the ways in which they can interact with the content and me.

This would be a good time to remember the important role of context (participants and setting) we discussed in Chapter 1: **context influences how we communicate and what we communicate about.** In the present case, the Spanish 1 and the conversation class are two different contexts. For example, participants have changed, and this influences how we interact. Input is clearly couched within a communicative context, being part of the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning in the classroom. As such, it is influenced by participants and setting. For this reason, we talk about "level appropriateness."

Keep in mind that, no matter what the language (e.g., Spanish, English, Russian, Turkish) or age group (K-6, 7-12, college level, or more "mature" learners), the way we make input comprehensible remains the same. And there are no special attributes of Japanese, Russian, or Spanish that make one language harder to comprehend than another. I frequently hear from instructors, "But Spanish has more cognates, so it is easier to understand." This is a teacher's or expert's opinion. In the beginning stages, when learners know absolutely nothing and know no related language, it all sounds like Greek to them! A string of sounds in Spanish is just as foreign-sounding as a string of sounds in Japanese to the student in the earliest stages of learning. Although cognates may eventually be some help to the learner of Spanish, this is not the case at the earliest levels.

Input, Communication, and Authenticity

It is important to begin this section by stating the following: **Input is not a technique.** That is, input is not some new way to teach the same old thing. Let's look at typical textbook materials, which generally serve as the foundation for language courses. They are built around common ideas of "what to learn." There are particular "vocabulary groups" that must be "covered" in beginning classes, such as courses and majors, colors, numbers, daily routines, family members, body parts, among others. Likewise, typical grammatical units must be "covered." These often include regular present tense, irregular present tense, direct object pronouns, indirect object pronouns, case endings, past tense, past tense distinctions, and others depending on the language in focus. Let's call this the **traditional syllabus**, which can be found in any contemporary language textbook in any language taught in the United States. Yet there is no council or national organization with a policy stating "these are the things that need to be taught and practiced in language courses." This list simply *is*.

So what happens when new teaching ideas or approaches come along? The profession generally attempts to meld the new with the old, layering new ideas on top of an old foundation, so to speak. People try to teach the same old things in some new way. And so it has been with the increased importance of input in SLA. Many people view it as a technique for teaching the traditional syllabus.

In French, for example, many use input as a technique to teach regular *–er* verbs in the first chapter or vocabulary related to health in some later chapter. In German or Russian, they might use input as a technique to teach case endings. In Spanish, instructors might use input to teach the difference between *ser* and *estar* or to teach colors and numbers. Though we will see the importance of using input for a focus on form (grammar) in a later chapter, the point here is that the use of input as a technique is doomed to failure. The failure comes from expecting that teaching the same old things with input is superior to doing so some other way.

But the problem is not with input. The problem is that teachers who use input as a technique still see language learning as explicit learning + practice. As we saw in Chapters 1-3, a goal of contemporary language teaching is to move away from trying to teach language explicitly and instead to recognize that language emerges and develops over time in the learner's mind/brain. We can't force the acquisition of any particular thing via input any more than we can through explanation, study, and practice (see Chapters 3 and 6). Yet, input is one of the fundamental ingredients of language acquisition.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

I sometimes hear people say "But the communicative method (sic) doesn't work!" First, there is no such thing as "the" communicative method (we will discuss this shortly). Second, when I probe teachers, I find out that they are trying to teach the same old things in a new "communicative" way. And when their students don't perform better on the standard paper-and-pencil tests these teachers give, they think "the method" doesn't work. This is the classic scenario of doomed failure or self-fulfilling prophecy. How do we get people to think outside the box, then?

Wrapping these ideas up, **we shouldn't try to take our traditional notions of syllabi, textbooks, and language teaching and try to fit input into them.** Instead, we should take the fundamental role of input and communication as the centerpieces of the language learning/teaching enterprise and create curricula reflective of them. What kinds of teaching practices do this? What practices have tried to move away from the traditional syllabus and the model of explicit learning + practice?

Immersion or Content-Based Instruction

Immersion programs and content-based instruction generally do not emphasize language as a separate "period" of the day focusing solely on the language. Instead, subjects such as social studies, science, and math are taught in the second language. In full immersion, subjects are taught in the second language all day. In partial or dual immersion, it may be for one-half day. In some programs, the immersion is full in the early grades, which transitions to partial immersion, and then to first-language-only by the end of the elementary school experience.

Clearly, immersion programs embody the idea that input embedded within communicative events is central to language acquisition. What could be more communicative than immersion? It involves the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning. And, of course, it has a purpose that is not the language itself: to learn subject matter. So

immersion programs have a clear cognitive-information purpose for language use between students and teachers.

A good deal of research has been conducted on immersion programs, largely in Canada, where they are the most developed and widespread. The results are clear in that learners reach higher levels of ability with language than in "traditional" classrooms, with no loss of knowledge about content/subject matter. Some researchers are concerned that learners don't get far enough, that perhaps immersion programs need to include some kind of focus on form (see Chapter 6) to push language acquisition along. It is not clear, however, whether the outcomes of immersion are due to the need to focus on form or to the quality of the input and interaction in content classrooms.

For example, immersion programs include far fewer instances of past-tense time frames than expected. Even in history classes, the historical present ("In 1865, the Union wins the Civil War in the United States, and the Confederacy surrenders…") dominates over the actual past tense. The same may happen in literature classes ("So what motivates Ahab? Why is he hunting the whale?") And of course, immersion classrooms cannot provide the full gamut of psychosocial use of language found in typical communicative environments outside of the classroom.

> **"We should take the fundamental roles of input and communication as the fundamental centerpieces of the language learning/teaching enterprise and create curricula reflective of them."**

With these caveats in mind, immersion programs still offer effective language-learning models that are superior to traditional foci on language in isolated classes. They are superior in that they embody the essence of communication, input has a fundamental role in them, and they do not build classrooms around the traditional syllabus. Language acquisition is seen as a byproduct of communicating about content matter.

The Natural Approach

Developed by Tracy Terrell (and supported by Stephen Krashen) in the late 1970s and early 1980s, **the Natural Approach** is not immersion—it has no focus on content learning. It is an approach for existing language classes that meet for, say, one hour a day on particular days, like any other language class. The Natural Approach exposes learners to as much comprehensible input as possible, makes classes fun and engaging, and builds lessons around themes or topics rather than grammatical or vocabulary units. Thus the Natural Approach has no unit on the regular present tense, for example. Instead, it has units on such things as daily routines (when we get up, when we go to bed, what we do on the weekdays, how they might differ from what we do on the weekends) or families (what does

the typical family in our classroom look like, and how does this compare to the U.S. Census data?).

The Natural Approach never caught on in language teaching circles in the U.S., perhaps because it was too "radical" compared to standard explicit instruction and practice of grammar and vocabulary. Among those who claim to use it, the Natural Approach has become an approach that layers input over the traditional syllabus, making input a technique to teach the same old things. Thus, it is not clear to what extent The Natural Approach today embodies its actual foundational tenets from the late 1970s.

In addition, many Natural Approach activities in the classroom lacked communicative purpose; the point was to learn language without any psychosocial or cognitive-informational aim. Tasks, as we will see in the next chapter, can be incorporated into The Natural Approach to offer more purposeful use of language, but unfortunately Tracy Terrell passed away before the advent of tasks in language teaching. After his untimely death, no followers took on a leadership role to further push the approach into the contemporary communicative realm.

Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS)

Developed by Blaine Ray, **TPRS** is anchored in stories students hear/read, tell, and retell in class with the instructor's assistance. Because of its focus on first comprehending a story and working with it before actually telling it, TPRS puts input at the core of the curriculum. And because of active student involvement with the input, the approach follows basic ideas about the role of input in acquisition and learner engagement with the input.

A TPRS lesson structure is deceptively simple. The instructor "establishes meaning" by introducing the story and "pre-teaching" key vocabulary that will make the story more comprehensible to the learner. This is often done in the first language. The second part of the lesson is "asking the story," in which the teacher uses a variety of questions to delve into and create the story with the students:

TEACHER: Is the story about a boy?
STUDENTS: Yes!
TEACHER: OK. Yes, the story is about a boy. What does the boy want? Does he want a guitar?
STUDENTS: No!
TEACHER: Does he want a piano?
STUDENTS: Yes!
TEACHER: Yes, he wants a piano. What kind of piano does he want? Does he want a small piano?
STUDENTS: No!
TEACHER: No, he doesn't want a small piano. Does he want a big piano?

STUDENTS: Yes!

TEACHER: Yes, he wants a big piano.

In the final phase of the lesson, students read and interact with the reading.

There is a lot more to TPRS than in this brief example (see the Foundational Readings for sources and to get more information). But an examination of TPRS shows us how it clearly reflects the ideas about making input comprehensible discussed previously. For example, teachers talk *with* students, not at them. Students are actively engaged with the input. As such, TPRS also reflects a fundamental tenet of contemporary language teaching: if you're going to teach communicatively, you'd better have a definition of communication. A typical TPRS lesson has constant expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning appropriate for the context of the classroom.

What is not clear in TPRS is whether it has a communicative purpose: What is the outcome of a TPRS lesson other than to learn a language? Do learners know something about themselves and the world around them that they didn't know before? Arguably, telling a story is the outcome, but how this outcome fits within the psychosocial or cognitive-informational purpose of communication remains to be seen. Moreover, to do TPRS one must be specially trained in it (local, regional, and national conferences and workshops are dedicated to this). TPRS is much more structured than any other approach and, for some teachers, may seem a bit restrictive. Nonetheless, TPRS classrooms are "more communicative" than most "traditional" language classrooms and involve much more input and interaction with it.

A Note on Reading

For some time, we have known that reading is one of the most important sources of input for the development of vocabulary. **Reading provides the kind of input not found in everyday spoken language.** Written language tends to be more elaborate, contains features of language that are infrequent in spoken discourse, and provides much more vocabulary than what we hear in everyday interactions. Thus, another good source of input to push acquisition and communication along is written input. As in the case of oral input, written input should be level appropriate and the learner should be actively engaged in interpreting meaning from the text. As the learner progresses, written texts will naturally become more complicated, providing the kind of more elaborate discourse that pushes acquisition and communication into higher levels of attainment. When and how to introduce written texts is a matter of choice. There is no rule on how or whether to introduce written language from the beginning. The point here is that reading is an important source of input if we want learners to move into more advanced stages.

Authenticity

Authenticity refers to whether classroom activities and materials use **authentic language use and authentic sources** from native-speaking cultures. That is, authentic materials are texts (e.g., websites, ads, newspaper articles) written by native speakers for other native speakers. In some circles of language teaching, there is a push to use authentic materials from the beginning. In some cases, advocates push for an exclusive use of authentic materials and "shun" materials written for the second language learner.

When it comes to the nature of the classroom context for *communication*, what is the purpose of authentic materials? In the rush to bring authentic materials into the classroom, teachers may lose sight of the role of input and "teach the authentic text" the way they would teach any other subject matter. That is, teachers become so concerned about language in the text they lose sight of content and input related to it. And, of course, there is the important question of whether authentic texts are level-appropriate. What kind of authentic text would contain appropriate level input for the first semester learner of Japanese? Should teachers wait to introduce authentic texts and sources once learners have higher levels of ability with language? And how would the learner interact with that text in the classroom?

I like to look at the issue of authentic texts from the perspective of context and communication. Remember the definition of context from Chapter 1? It refers to participants and setting. One conclusion of this definition is the following: **The classroom is its own authentic context.** It has real participants in a real setting. The classroom is not the doctor's office. It's not a restaurant. It's not a train station. It's a classroom full of particular people: students and teacher. This delimits what is talked about, how it is talked about, and the nature (quality) of the input learners are exposed to. These learners are not native speakers, they are not in a native speaking environment, and the classroom is not a second language cultural context. Language use is authentic only if informed by the communicative context in which it occurs.

So, when language teachers seek to incorporate authentic materials and authentic language use into the classroom, they should do so by asking: To what extent is this incorporation authentic to the classroom context itself? And let's be clear: We are not talking about culture days or content in which we explore the nature of the second language culture(s) as part of what we do. The issue here is to what extent we let authentic text and language drive what we do or we let what we know about language, communication, language acquisition, and the appropriateness of input drive how we use "authentic" materials.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

A basic tenet of good teaching is that it's not about the material you choose, but what you do with it. In other words, teachers should make the task level appropriate for the learner and worry less about the material or text. This idea may be appropriate for culture days but does not apply to choosing material as input for acquisition and communication in the classroom. Input must be comprehensible and engaging. Authentic material may fit the bill, but what about the learner who has limited ability with the language? What authentic material works as comprehensible input for acquisition for that learner?

Implications for Language Teaching

We have already explored the following implications in this chapter:

Input should be central to the classroom, not something "added on."
Input must be comprehensible and level-appropriate.
Instructors should be talking with and not at learners.

Let's consider two other implications that may be less clear from the chapter.

The first concerns the linguistic and communicative abilities of teachers. Across the country, states regulate certification requirements for language teachers. For oral ability, the range is often Intermediate-high to Advanced-low on the ACTFL oral proficiency scale. Universities tend not to have specific language ability level requirements for teaching assistants, instructors, or even professors. However, job advertisements often say something like "native-like ability required," even when no official test of native-likeness is administered.

In looking at teacher qualifications, regardless of academic standing, we need to ask: Do all teachers have the requisite skills to conduct their classes in the L2? What are the quality and quantity of input and interaction teachers can provide? Do they have the full range of communicative abilities that allow them to easily and comfortably orchestrate a fully communicative class with their students? Recognizing the importance of input, ACTFL

proposes a minimum of 90% second language use by teachers. Thus another implication from this chapter is:

Instructors should be proficient enough in the language themselves so that the provision of input and interaction is easy and effortless for them.

A final implication from the discussion in this chapter is what teachers expect from language teaching materials. If input and interaction with it are central to the classroom, do teachers expect to find this input in the materials marketed to them by commercial publishers? The answer isn't clear. Almost all commercial textbooks repeat the traditional syllabus described earlier in this chapter, and the role of input is limited to "input as technique" to teach vocabulary and grammar. We discussed this earlier in the chapter, noting how "input as technique" to teach the same old things will most likely fail. This leaves us with the following implication:

Instructors need to demand different materials from publishers and marketers—materials in which input is central and the "syllabus" is built upon themes and topics, not vocabulary and grammar.

Foundational Readings

Gass, S. M. (1998). *Input, interaction, and the second language learner*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. (See especially chapters 4 and 5.)

Hatch. E. (1983). Simplified input and second language acquisition. In R. W. Andersen (Ed.), Pidginization and creolization as language acquisition (pp. 64-86). Cambridge, MA: Newbury House.

Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis.* New York, NY: Longman.*

Krashen, S. (2004). *The Power of Reading* (2nd Ed.). Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Ray, B., & Seely, C. (2105). *Fluency Through TPR Storytelling* (7th Ed.). Berkeley, CA: Command Performance Language Institute.

*As of this writing, The input hypothesis is out of print. However, Stephen Krashen has told me he will make it available online in the near future.

Discussion Questions and Food for Thought

1. Review the chapter and make a list of all bolded or italicized words (except non-English words), terms and concepts. Can you define each one or explain what it means? Can you give examples of your definitions?
2. Conduct an online search of videoclips from seasoned instructors teaching with TPRS, The Natural Approach, immersion, or other input-based approaches. Analyze the

teacher-talk for comprehensibility using the features described in this chapter (rate/speed, repetition, pausing, clarity of content). Compare your findings with a newscast or live TV show in the same language.

3. Using the videoclips you found for question 2, examine the interaction of students. How are they "engaged" with the input? What do they do to signal comprehension/non-comprehension? Are their responses level-appropriate? What does the teacher do when a learner doesn't understand, or responds with incorrect information?
4. Review the tables of contents of three textbooks for the beginning level of the language you teach or will teach. What do you notice about these tables of content? Is there more similarity than difference? Also review the preface for the instructor and student. Does it mention the role of input? If so, what does it say about input?
5. The centrality of input in the classroom, along with research on SLA, suggests a move away from the traditional syllabus that focuses on vocabulary and grammar units. But what would we put in place of these units? How would we organize our weeks, our semesters? Try and come up with twenty topics around which activities, games, readings, and so on could be organized. To get you started, here are three.
   - What clothes we wear, and why we wear them.
   - Do we have healthy diets?
   - Who we tell our problems/secrets to, and what we keep to ourselves.
6. Some companies produce reading texts and stories intended for use in the classroom that are geared toward instructors using TPRS. Examine one of the beginning level books/stories for a language you are familiar with. What do you notice about the story as input? In particular, what do you notice about its comprehensibility (e.g., sentence length, repetition)?
7. Imagine it is the first day of your class. Students come in and are surprised to see you using the language. "Where are the worksheets?" they ask. "Why aren't we learning tenses?" What would you say to them? How would you explain why it is your job to use the second language as much as possible?
8. In 2015, I suggested film and video as a source of additional input for students (VanPatten, B. (2015). Film and language acquisition. *Hispania, 98*, 391-393). Review this short essay and the questions listed in it regarding how film might be used in the classroom. What is your reaction? Can you see any way film can be used as additional material (not in lieu of the teacher)? What other sources of input outside of the classroom are there for students, and what are the pros and cons of using those sources?

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I can offer a definition of "input" and give examples.	○	○	○
2. I understand the role of the instructor as "input provider" in language acquisition.	○	○	○
3. I can describe how to make input comprehensible.	○	○	○
4. I understand that input is not a technique, but is foundational to the communicative curriculum.	○	○	○
5. I understand the difference between talking "at" and talking "with" learners.	○	○	○

CLT PRINCIPLE

Tasks Should Form the Backbone of the Communicative Curriculum

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I can state the difference between an Exercise, an Activity, and a Task.	○	○	○
2. I can identify a Task when I see one.	○	○	○
3. I understand the difference between an input-oriented Task and an output-oriented Task.	○	○	○
4. I can state the difference between Tasks as drop-ins and Tasks as the goals of units.	○	○	○
5. I understand what it means to determine what students need to know and what they need to be able to do in order to be successful with a task.	○	○	○

The principle at the center of this chapter focuses on the kinds of communicative events that instructors might use in the classroom:

Tasks—and not Exercises or Activities—should form the backbone of the communicative classroom.

In this chapter we will explore:

- *The nature of tasks.*
- *The difference between a Task, an Exercise, and an Activity.*
- *How the teacher can use Tasks to construct a communicative curriculum.*

The following exercise comes from a college-level textbook that claims to have a

communicative approach:

Restate the question using inversion.

1. *Est-ce que vous parlez espagnol?*
2. *Est-ce qu'il étudie à Paris?*
3. *Est-ce qu'ils voyagent avec des amis?*
4. *Est-ce que tu aimes les cours de langues?*
5. [several more items like these]

The following activity comes from another college-level textbook that makes the same claim:

Interview your partner and find out what he or she did last night.

Almost all contemporary language textbooks are full of "activities" like these. And yet, they are not communicative at all or, at best, are "partially" communicative.

The focus of this chapter are those kinds of events in class that actually promote communication, thus falling under the rubric of *communicative.* We'll begin by first reviewing our definition of communication from Chapter 1. (Have you noticed how our definition of communication seems to crop up in every chapter?)

Communication is the expression, interpretation, and sometimes negotiation of meaning in a given context. Communication is also purposeful.

As we concluded in Chapter 1, **if teachers and students are not engaged in the expression and interpretation of meaning, what they're doing is not communicative.** But there is more. **If there isn't a communicative purpose to what they're doing, then teachers and students may not actually be engaged in a communicative event.**

To review: What's a communicative purpose? People generally use language for one or both of the following purposes:

- *psychosocial:* to establish and maintain relationships; to grease the wheels of interactions (e.g., saying 'hi', asking how someone is doing, complimenting someone, inquiring about the family, asking what plans someone has just to be nice)

- *cognitive-informational:* to learn something new about other people and the world around us (or to confirm information); to obtain information in order to complete another task (e.g., to ask if anyone needs anything at the store because we're on our way there and can get it for them, to explain how to use the new washing machine, to deduce who could

be the killer and who is innocent, to read instructions in order to put something together)

We also touched on the idea that communication may be used to entertain. So let's return to the two activities above from two books claiming to represent a communicative approach. Are these activities communicative? They are not. Why not?

First and foremost, they contain no expression or interpretation of meaning. In the first activity, the learner is simply changing the question from one form to another. We could insert nonsense words, and the student could still perform the activity. We will see later how this works when we discuss Exercises. And, of course, the activity lacks any communicative purpose: There is no psychosocial or informational-cognitive communicative purpose underlying what students and teachers are doing. And I doubt anyone is trying to entertain anyone. The activity's sole purpose is to explicitly practice making questions using inversion. Students and teachers are not finding out anything about each other. Nor are they building relationships through this "interaction."

In the second activity, students *seem* to be communicating. By having to talk about what they did last night, aren't they expressing and interpreting meaning? Maybe. Let's imagine the students simply going through the motions. One student says, "I studied." The other says, "I watched TV." Neither is saying much and we're not even sure they're paying attention to each other. But let's assume they are. So perhaps they're expressing and interpreting some kind of meaning. Here comes the all-important second question: What's the purpose of this activity? Why is Ellen asking Alex what he did last night, and why is Alex asking Ellen the same? We have no idea. Neither do the students—well, that's not quite true. Most teachers and students would see this activity as just one more way to "practice the past tense." So, again, focus is not on communication, but the practice of a particular linguistic feature. This activity thus has no communicative purpose.

> **"Just because mouths are moving in a classroom doesn't mean that students and teachers are engaged in any kind of communicative event."**

These activity types clearly show that just because mouths are moving in a classroom does not mean students and teachers are engaged in any kind of communicative event. This is crystal-clear in the first activity. In the second activity, just because students are doing "pair work" doesn't mean they are engaged in a communicative event or are communicating. **Pair work is not necessarily communicative.**

You are probably asking, "Then, what is a communicative activity?" In the next section, we will review what are called "Tasks" and contrast them with what are more typical in the language classroom: Exercises and Activities.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Have you ever shopped for textbooks? How do you make your decision on which textbook is better than another? When a textbook claims to be communicative or proficiency-oriented, how do you determine whether it is? You might interview fellow practitioners to see what they say, and come back to these questions after you have read this book to see if your thoughts have changed at all.

Tasks in the Language Classroom

Tasks are the quintessential communicative event in contemporary language teaching. The exact definition of tasks varies somewhat among scholars, but at the kernel of all definitions you'll find the following:

- **Tasks involve the expression and interpretation of meaning.**
- **Tasks have a purpose that is not language practice.**

In this chapter we will discuss the kinds of Tasks I believe work best in contemporary language classes. I have a bias, though: I teach at the college level, so the Tasks I use reflect that context (setting and participants). Keep this in mind as you read.

Let's start with two Tasks for beginning language courses, so you, the reader, do not conclude that Tasks are something for more advanced work. I have used the Task "At What Age?" at a number of workshops. (By the way, my reason for capitalizing Tasks will become clear a bit later.)

At What Age?

Step 1*:* Write down at what age you think a person *typically* does each of the following activities:

1. A person graduates from college at the age of _____.

2. A person gets married at the age of _____.

3. A person has a first child at the age of _____.

4. A person dies at the age of _____.

Step 2*:* Now interview someone in class. Ask him or her questions to find out how they answered each item. Here's a model to help you. Jot down next to your answers above what your partner says!

MODEL: OK. At what age does a person graduate from college?

Step 3: Listen as your instructor leads a discussion on your answers. In a minute, you may learn something new! [The instructor then asks a student from each pair how they answered the questions, writing their answers on the board, e.g., "Bobby. What did you say was the typical age for graduating from college? And what did Melinda say?" The instructor then asks the class to determine the mean for each age for each question. Once that is calculated, the instructor then reveals data from the latest U.S. census.]

The second Task comes from my own classroom experience. During the first week of a course, I would collect information on students to have some very basic bio-data about them. It dawned on me that I could have the students themselves do this, so I converted the collection of the information into a Task the students could do.

For Your Instructor

Step 1. Look at the information below. You will fill it in with information you obtain from a fellow student and turn it in to your instructor.

Step 2. Think about the questions you will need to ask your classmate. If you are unsure, raise your hand, and your instructor will help you.

Step 3. Now pair up with someone. As your partner answers the questions, jot the information down on a sheet of paper. You can then enter this information neatly into the box afterward.

My name is _____

Profile of My Classmate

My classmate's name is _____

He/She is from _____

His/Her major is _____

He/She is taking these classes this semester:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

He/She is taking a total of_____credits/hours this semester

His/Her favorite class is _____

At the end of this Task, the instructor collects the information and keeps it handy as a way of knowing some basic things about his/her students.

What makes "At What Age?" and "For Your Instructor" Tasks? Do they contain expression and interpretation of meaning? Yes, they do. In both Tasks, the students must say something, and someone else must pay attention to it in order to respond. At the same time, the person who asks the questions must pay attention to the response, because it is needed a bit later in the task. So clearly students are expressing and interpreting meaning.

Is there communicative purpose in these Tasks? The answer, again, is yes. In both cases the purpose is cognitive-informational.

- The purpose of "At What Age?" is to find out when we think certain life events happen. Then we compare our thoughts to actual government data, to learn something about the world around us. Students (and workshop participants) are often surprised at the actual typical ages for these data. For example, the age of having a first child is lower than the age at which most people marry! (I often follow up with data from other countries as a brief cultural comparison.)

- The purpose of "For Your Instructor" is to provide the instructor with basic information on the class. Who are these students? What are their majors? What are they taking this

term? How "busy" are they with classes? All of this is potentially useful to the instructor. Rather than simply have students fill out a card and provide this information, I ask students to do it for me. Thus they are engaged in a communicative event with a cognitive-informational purpose: to provide particular information to me, the instructor, about another student.

Let's contrast Tasks, then, with **Exercises**. Here is the first textbook activity we looked at in this chapter.

Restate the question using inversion.

1. *Est-ce que vous parlez espagnol?*
2. *Est-ce qu'il étudie à Paris?*
3. *Est-ce qu'ils voyagent avec des amis?*
4. *Est-ce que tu aimes les cours de langues?*
5. [several more items like this]

What makes this an Exercise and not a Task? The characteristics of an Exercise are:

- There is no focus on the interpretation and expression of meaning.
- The purpose is to practice language.

In this particular Exercise, students can do what is asked of them without paying attention to meaning. How do we know this? We can substitute nonsense words, and the Exercise is still doable. For example, *Est-ce que vous cavez espagnol? —> Cavez-vous espagnol? Caver* is a made-up word, yet I can transform the *est-ce que* question into a question with inversion. Likewise, I can simply invent silly sentences with real words that make no sense and do the same. For example, *Est-ce que vous mangez des pierres? —> Mangez-vous des pierres?* The question asks if you eat rocks. I don't know about you but I have never asked this question in my life. It is nonsensical. Yet, I can make the transformation from one question type to another as I work my way through the Exercise.

And don't think that, just because you make the sentence more relevant to the student or to "real life," it is somehow more communicative. For example, the first item is perfectly fine in this regard: *Est-ce que vous parlez espagnol?* 'Do you speak Spanish?' This is a perfectly fine question to ask someone at a cocktail party, a job interview, or even during class. But no one is actually asking a question here! We are not at a cocktail party, we are not at a job interview, and in class we are not positing this question because we want to know who speaks Spanish. Instead, we are transforming one kind of sentence into another. We are practicing. We are not engaged in the expression or interpretation of meaning.

So **Exercises lack any intent to express or interpret meaning**, and **the sole**

purpose of Exercises is to explicitly practice language. The point of the Exercise we just reviewed is to practice inversion in French. The underlying belief behind Exercises is that students need to practice vocabulary and grammar as "part of learning to communicate," but we know this belief is wrong. As we saw in Chapter 2, what is normally taught and practiced as grammar isn't what winds up in people's heads. And, as we saw in Chapter 3, learners don't get a linguistic system in their heads from practice (and this includes vocabulary). They get it from a complex interaction between input and the internal mechanisms that act on input.

Here's the other activity we reviewed:

Interview your partner and find out what he or she did last night.

Is this a Task? No. At first blush it appears the activity involves the expression and interpretation of meaning. Let's assume it does have such a focus—that learners try to find out from each other what they did last night. But why do I want to know what my partner did last night? Why am I asking this information and why is she answering me? It has no communicative purpose. At best, it is **partially communicative**, in that it seems to have a focus on the expression and interpretation of meaning, but it lacks a purpose other than to practice language.

I call these kinds of activities exactly what they are: **Activities**. I use a capital 'A' with Activities here to differentiate them from activities with lower case 'a,' which refers to activities in general; Activity with capital 'A' refers to these partially communicative activities just described. (Now you can figure out why I also use capital 'E' for 'Exercise' and capital 'T' for 'Task.')

Earlier I said, "At first blush it appears the activity involves the expression and interpretation of meaning." Why "at first blush"? Why this caveat? Learners do not always treat Activities as acts involving the expression and interpretation of meaning. Based on teachers' behaviors and expectations, students often discern that Activities are just "more language practice" and treat them as such. (Review the samples from students in Chapter 1 in which, during their pair work, they are clearly not treating Activities as communicative.)

To summarize, then, we can divide classroom events into three standard types, using our definition and knowledge of communication:

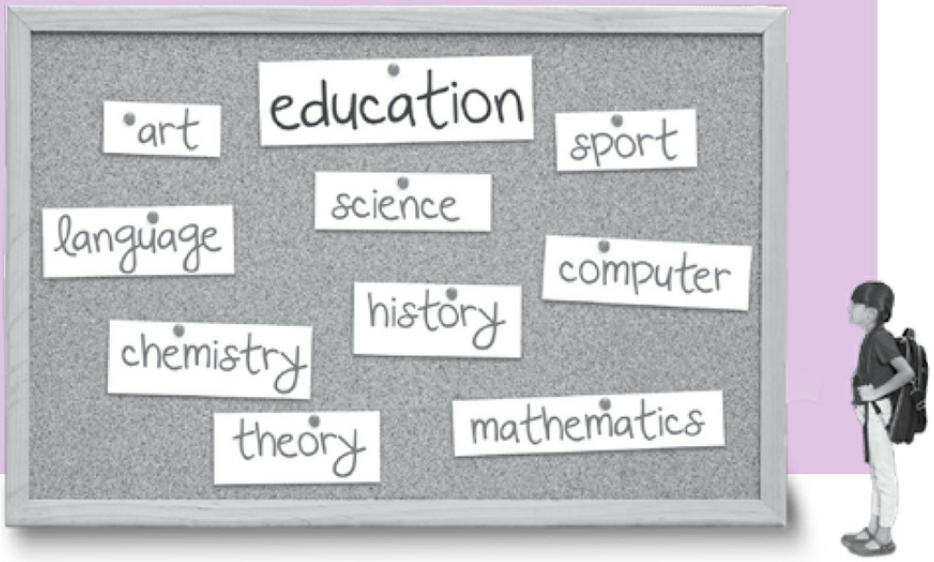
	EXPRESSION AND INTERPRETATION OF MEANING?	COMMUNICATIVE PURPOSE?	SUMMARY STATEMENT
Exercise	No	No	Not Communicative
Activity	Yes	No	Partially Communicative
Task	Yes	Yes	Fully Communicative

You may ask: If Exercises are not communicative, do they have a purpose in the communicative curriculum? Don't students need "to learn the basics" before they communicate? We can answer this by (1) reminding ourselves why instructors engage in these events, and (2) reminding ourselves about the nature of language and the nature of acquisition. The purpose of Exercises (for instructors who use them) is to practice language, presumably because practicing the vocabulary or practicing a grammar point is "how you learn it." Thus, instructors who use Exercises must believe that language acquisition happens in a particular way. But we know this not to be true. We know that acquisition happens as a complex, constrained process that involves input (defined in a particular way) and internal mechanisms (Universal Grammar and general learning architecture).

Exercises fail as events that promote or cause acquisition, because they do not account for the most basic sketch of acquisition we have constructed after almost five decades of research. In short, Exercises lack input and do not provide the kind of data the learning mechanisms need for creating language in the learner's mind/brain. At best, they waste time that could be used doing other things in the communicative classroom.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Some students like Exercises. In our third-semester Spanish classes, many students place in from high school. When they don't get worksheets and Exercises (staples of previous Spanish classes for many of them), some complain they are not learning. Like many teachers, principals, administrators and others, these students see language as other subject matter that, like math, history, chemistry and all others, you put a grade on and show "achievement" in. It's probably time we reconsider this notion.



What Kinds of Tasks Are There?

Let's examine two other Tasks and see what the difference is between them. They both deal with the same topic and are based on tasks that James F. Lee and I have used in other work (see Foundational Readings).

Version A: Sedentary, or active?

Step 1. Look over the following. Which activities did you do yesterday?

1. I read.
2. I worked at the computer.
3. I worked out/I exercised.
4. I rode my bike somewhere.
5. I walked somewhere.
6. I drove somewhere.
7. I watched TV.
8. I watched a movie.
9. I cleaned house/my room.
10. I cooked.

Step 2. Now interview someone in class, asking them if they did the activities from Step 1. The questions you need are below. Be sure to note that person's response!

1. Did you read something?
2. Did you work at the computer?
3. Did you work out? Did you exercise?
4. Did you ride your bike somewhere?
5. Did you walk somewhere?
6. Did you drive somewhere?
7. Did you watch TV?
8. Did you watch a movie?
9. Did you clean house? Did you clean your room?
10. Did you cook?

Step 3. Now rate yourself and your partner on the following scale, based on the information you obtained in Steps 1 and 2.

very active very sedentary

5 4 3 2 1

Step 4. Listen as your instructor leads a discussion on the results from Step 3. [The instructor asks students for their rankings and puts them on the board. The class calculates the group average. Just how active/sedentary is this group of students? How does the instructor fit in? The instructor shares his/her answers, and the class assigns a ranking.]

Version B: Sedentary, or active?

Step 1. List ten activities you did yesterday (e.g., I worked out. I read.)

Step 2. Now interview someone in class, asking them if they did the activities you listed in Step 1. Be sure to note that person's response!

MODEL: Did you work out yesterday?

Step 3. Now rate yourself and your partner on the following scale based on the information you obtained in Steps 1 and 2.

very active very sedentary

5 4 3 2 1

Step 4. Listen as your instructor leads a discussion on the results from Step 3. [The instructor asks students for their rankings and puts them on the board. The class

calculates the group average. Just how active/sedentary is this group of students? How does the instructor fit in? The instructor shares his/her answers, and the class assigns a ranking.]

What's the difference between Versions A and B? Both are Tasks. They both involve the expression and interpretation of meaning. They both respect the context of the classroom (i.e., the Tasks respect who the participants are and what the physical setting of the classroom is). And they both have a cognitive-informational outcome, as students and instructor learn something about themselves and the world around them (i.e., their level of physical activity). And so you know, when I do this activity with students, in the end we look at data I've collected on age groups using this same Task. What we find out is that as you get older, your physical activity goes down. Then, somewhere in your late 60s, it goes up again.

> **"Input-oriented Tasks allow for communication in the classroom when learners have limited expressive ability. Output-oriented Tasks allow for communication when learners have more expressive ability."**

The difference between the two is that Version A is an **input-oriented Task** while Version B is an **output-oriented Task**. In the input-oriented Task, learners do not create with language. All they need is in front of them. They check off sentences they read, they read questions aloud to each other, and they are asked only to respond to, or make use of, language that's in front of them. During Version A, learners are largely engaged in the interpretation side of communication. In short, **they do not create meaning.**

In Version B, however, learners must create meaning on their own. They must come up with sentences and questions to ask each other. They are engaged in both interpretation and expression of meaning as they complete the Task.

Why is it important to have two different categories of Tasks? The answer is simple. Input-oriented Tasks allow for communication in the classroom when learners have limited expressive ability with language. Output-oriented Tasks allow for communication when learners have more expressive ability with language. I often hear from instructors that they can't use Tasks in their beginning classes because their students "can't do anything with language yet." These teachers are unnecessarily viewing Tasks as output activities, forgetting that the interpretation of meaning is just as valid as expression of meaning in the communicative classroom.

Thus, teachers don't need to wait for learners to get more language to use Tasks in the classroom. They can use input-oriented Tasks from almost the beginning. And, of course, instructors can use any combination of input-oriented and output-oriented Tasks, depending

on learners' familiarity with the topic, vocabulary, and other aspects of language.

So, for example, Version A might be good when learners are shaky with or just learning past tense. Version B might be better when learners have more control over past tense in their output. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines would deem Version A more appropriate for Novice-level or Intermediate-level learners and Version B better for Intermediate-High to Advanced. The point here is **not to view Tasks as always output-oriented**. Because communication involves expression and interpretation of meaning, instructors can fashion Tasks to focus on one or both sides of an interaction, depending on the student level.

Have you noticed something about the Tasks we've looked at so far? It is this: **Tasks are structured**. They have steps—a procedure—that guides students and lets them know when they have finished.

Let's contrast the Tasks we've seen with the one Activity we looked at. In the Activity, students are simply told to interview someone to find out what he/she did last night. As a student, how many things do I have to find out? One? Two? Five? How do I know when I've finished? When is the Activity completed? We could change the Activity to be something like, "Interview someone and find out five things that person did last night." Now I know when I'm done with the Activity. But with a Task, it is always clear to a student when he or she has finished because the Task specifies the information that must be obtained. There is always some concrete immediate informational goal.

In addition, in the Activity I'm not guided. How do I start? What language do I need? In a Task, the event is structured so I am helped and guided from beginning to end. I know how to start, proceed, and conclude. Activities don't require this kind of structure. Tasks always do.

So far we have looked at Tasks that have typical cognitive-informational outcomes; that is, those that taught us something about the world around us. But a cognitive-informational outcome might also include a project. These kinds of Tasks are project-based Tasks. Here are examples of **project-based Tasks** that work in language classrooms:

- *Creating a pamphlet.* Students create a pamphlet for next-semester students who will take the course this semester. What useful information would be included in that pamphlet? What would it look like? Other pamphlets might welcome international students, or provide instructions on how to do something or tips on using social media.

- *Creating a Wikipedia page.* Students create a Wikipedia page on a movie the class has watched, a story the class has read (e.g., synopsis, protagonist, antagonist, major conflicts), or another shared experience.

- *Scripting and filming a documentary.* Students interview speakers of a second language (locally, via Skype, or by some other means) on a particular topic and then put together a very short film.

- *Creating a collage.* Students assemble a series of images that represent a theme (e.g., sexism, racism, equality, spirituality) or narrate a story or news item. The images can include captions/words. Students then display their collages and describe/explain the images.

- *Conducting a survey/an experiment.* Students conduct a survey to find out what students think of language learning, another culture, or some other theme appropriate for the language they are learning. They can then gather data online, collect results, and present their findings to the class and/or publish them on a website.

- *Writing lyrics to music.* Students listen to a melody without lyrics and work together to create four or five stanzas to make public via a course management system or some other online platform.

In project-based Tasks, as in all Tasks, there is no intent to practice language per se or any particular feature of language. Instead, the final outcome is a project such as the examples above. Such projects involve a cognitive-informational purpose, because, as students work toward their goals, they learn things about the world around them on the way.

The particular project-based Tasks listed above would take some time, and would be best as long-term course goals. Would they be good for beginners? Probably not. They may be better for more advanced learners. Teachers might consider, then, how **Tasks could progress across time from simpler Tasks to more complicated Tasks.**

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Outside of language classes, educational specialists have touted Project-Based Learning (PBL), in which students gain some kind of knowledge and/or skill while investigating a topic and responding to engaging or complex questions about it. Yet we don't want to confuse PBL with the Tasks and projects-as-Tasks described here. Most PBL is beyond what students of language can do at the lower levels. Imported from educational contexts, PBL assumes ability with language. This is why it is a popular approach for learning science, history, and other subjects; speakers work in their first language to complete PBL projects. but beginning students don't have skills in the second language equivalent to their first language skills. So PBL in languages might be better for more advanced language proficiency levels. Do a Google search and see what PBL looks like. Then you can determine if it would work for you at lower levels of language proficiency.

Working With Tasks

Most language textbooks, especially those for world languages, do not contain Tasks. How, then, can Tasks be integrated into the curriculum? There are two principal ways in which Tasks can form the backbone of a curriculum: (1) **to drop them in at points that make sense** thematically, or (2) **to let them drive the curriculum**. We will look at each option individually.

The first way to integrate Tasks into the curriculum is to examine the materials being used and ask, "Is there a Task that makes sense for this thematic unit?" Let's consider "For Your Instructor": When might we drop this Task into the curriculum? Perhaps after students have studied subject matter (e.g., names and terms for history, English, languages, humanities, science). In many world language textbooks this happens relatively early. By then, students have already been introduced to such things as saying their names and telling where they're from. This Task, then, would fit in quite naturally. (We'll address question "But what if they haven't learned X yet?" in a moment.)

Regarding the Task "Sedentary or Active?, Version A, the input-oriented Task, could be dropped into the curriculum at just about any time once the students have begun to accumulate some basic vocabulary related to daily activities and routines. But it might an

excellent Task when students are first exposed to the past tense. Why? Because the Task's input-oriented version does not require any production of the past tense in a creative manner. The Task is "self-contained" and doable by students who are just learning how to talk about the past. It would make an excellent Task for any thematic unit on daily routines —and not those that many world language textbooks concoct to teach reflexive and pronominal verbs (e.g., wake up, take a shower, shave, brush your teeth), but actual daily routines (e.g., get up, eat, work, go to class, work out, study, go to bed).

In short, Tasks can be dropped in at particular times during the curriculum to shore up the classroom's communicative nature.

Tasks might even be used as measures of proficiency development. For example, ACTFL has advocated the use of can-do statements. These can be general statements ("I can talk about my daily life, including information about family and friends…") or more specific ones ("I can talk about what I do on weekdays and how my weekday schedule is different from my weekend schedule"). However, can-do statements may not be specific enough for us to know how successful a student is: what does it mean to "talk about my daily life" or to "talk about what I do on weekdays?" Can-do statements may be like the Activities we reviewed earlier: they may involve the expression and interpretation of meaning, but when is the Can-do Activity over? When I say three things? Five things? Ten things?

> **"One way in which Tasks can help form the backbone of the communicative curriculum is to use them like can-do statements—almost like mini-assessments."**

In this case, we might consider **the Task as an alternative to the can-do statement**. If I can do "Sedentary or Active?" I am concretely demonstrating my ability to talk about my daily life. If I can do "For Your Instructor," I am demonstrating another way to talk about daily life (e.g., classes, schedules, credits). So one way Tasks can help to form the backbone of the communicative curriculum is to assume the function of Can-do statements —almost like "mini assessments" during the curriculum. If I can do the Task, I am demonstrating some facet of communicative ability and proficiency development.

In fact, **Tasks can be used as alternatives to traditional testing** for the communicative, proficiency-oriented classroom. For instance, students could record themselves performing the Task, using their smartphones, laptops, iPads, or other devices. Then they upload their recordings (with clearly identifiable information) into a predetermined site. The instructor then listens to each set of Tasks and, depending on the evaluation metric used, assigns a performance grade.

Tasks can also form the backbone of the curriculum by driving the content of the course. This means abandoning textbooks and traditional classroom approaches and **forming units**

around Tasks. How does this work? For example, let's say I want to make "For Your Instructor" the first unit of my Spanish curriculum. I analyze the Task and ask myself: What do students need to know and know how to do in order to complete this Task? Then I work backwards and build in activities and mini-tasks that work toward the main Task. This is often called **backward planning** or **backward design**: you think about the goal you have in mind (in this case, a particular Task) figure out how you will get there, and develop a map:

- Select the Task you want to be the "goal."
- Determine what students need to know and know how to do in order to complete the Task.
- Develop activities and mini-tasks that work on what they need to know and know how to do so that they work toward the goal.

One caveat here involves the question of what students need to know and know how to do. Instructors make broad statements such as "they need to know numbers" or "they need to know the past tense." Such statements are usually not accurate. Let's look at "Sedentary or Active?" (Version A or B). Many instructors' gut reaction is: "Students need to know the past tense." But do they? A careful examination suggests that students need to know only first-person singular and second-person singular, the verb forms they work with on their own in Steps 1 and 2. For Step 4, the teacher will provide the scaffolding necessary to work with third-person verb forms, so students may not actually need to know these verb forms before starting the Task. And because language acquisition is slow and piecemeal, it is fine if students learn only particular verb forms for a Task. In this way, Tasks drive the unit and help us shake off traditional ideas about what to teach and when.

In all use of Tasks, whether as "drop-ins" or unit goals, instructors must examine the Task and determine the tools students need to complete it. If the instructor is satisfied that students have the tools, the Task is good to go. If not, the instructor must create a map of Activities and mini-Tasks to help students prepare for the Task. (In the Epilogue, we'll see one example of how this works.)

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Try to imagine a textbook organized around Tasks instead of the traditional grammatical syllabus and vocabulary groups. How difficult is it for you to imagine such a thing? If it is difficult, why?

Implications for Language Teaching

Many of the implications for language teaching involving the central role of Tasks have already emerged in our discussion. In this section we will focus on additional implications that may be less clear. The first is:

Exercises and Activities are not the foundation of communicative or proficiency-oriented language teaching.

If our goal is to develop communicative ability with language, and if Exercises don't focus on meaning, then they are not particularly useful. They are not useful for "learning grammar," either. Since Activities lack communicative purpose, it is not clear whether teachers and students treat them as communicative events as opposed to practice with vocabulary and grammar.

Our second implication is:

Textbooks and commercial materials need to move away from Exercises and Activities as the staples of learning and make Tasks central to classroom activities.

This implication is a call for instructors to ask publishers and materials providers to include Tasks as central elements of textbooks and other commercial products. Unless instructors do this, or the demands in the market change, publishers will continue to drive the nature of language teaching by putting non-communicative materials in the hands of teachers and students.

If we consider ideas we've touched on in other chapters, then another implication arising from this chapter is:

Instructors need alternative means to assess students and perhaps even move away from "assigning grades" to students at the end of the semester.

This is really an implication of all the principles and ideas covered in this book so far. In

this chapter we examined one way Tasks can be used to assess performance. If we continue with this line of thought and move away from "language as other subject matter" (see Chapters 2 and 3), then performance-based approaches to student assessment are needed. There are already calls for such approaches in the profession, and numerous ACTFL publications advocate them. If Tasks are central to the curriculum, if they form its backbone, then we need alternatives to traditional testing and grading. This may be the ultimate challenge facing communicative language teaching in educational settings.

Foundational Readings

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VanGorp, K. (forthcoming). *Task-based language teaching*. The Routledge e-module series on Contemporary Language Teaching. New York, NY: Routledge.

Discussion Questions and Food for Thought

1. Review the chapter and make a list of all bolded or italicized words (except non-English words), terms and concepts. Can you define each one or explain what it means? Can you give examples of your definitions?
2. Select a textbook for the language you teach or will be teaching, and examine one chapter/lesson in it. Using the characteristics of Exercises, Activities, and Tasks outlined in this chapter, can you identify the types of things the textbook asks students to do? What is the relative ratio of Exercises to Activities to Tasks for that lesson?
3. Select one of the Tasks in this chapter and adapt it for the language you teach or will teach. Then analyze what students need to know and know how to do to perform that Task. Finally, see if you can find a "natural spot" in a textbook for the language you are working with to drop it in (assuming that text does not already contain a Task in that spot).
4. Read Chapter 4 of Lee and VanPatten, in which they explain how to use Tasks as lesson goals. Then return to the Task you selected for Question 3 above. Can you do the backward planning and map out what will happen before the Task is begun?

5. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an organization that promotes and researches the use of Tasks as “the central unit” of language teaching. See if you can find three to four examples of Tasks promoted by TBLT. In what ways are the tasks in TBLT similar to or different from those described in the present chapter?
6. Examine a university semester or secondary year-long curriculum. Focus on the lessons in its textbook. Develop five to six Tasks that can be used as performance assessments at key points during the semester or year.
7. Imagine using Tasks to assess students instead of traditional tests. Review the following rating guide for assessing students on the task, and discuss with someone else how you might apply the guide. If you can, ask several student volunteers to record the Task so you can listen to it later and apply the guide. What questions do you have about the rating guide? Are you worried about “grammar” and “accuracy”? What makes doing a Task successful? How does our definition of “communication” inform how we develop and make use of rubrics and guides for assessing Task performance?

Task Performance Rating Guide

2 points: The student can perform the Task with relative ease.

1 point: The student can perform the Task, but has occasional difficulty, or struggles at times during the Task.

0 points: The student could not perform the task, or struggled so much as to demonstrate basic inability.

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I can state the difference between an Exercise, an Activity, and a Task.	◯	◯	◯
2. I can identify a Task when I see one.	◯	◯	◯
3. I understand the difference between an input-oriented Task and an output-oriented Task.	◯	◯	◯
4. I can state the difference between Tasks as drop-ins and Tasks as the goals of units.	◯	◯	◯
5. I understand what it means to determine what students need to know and what they need to be able to do in order to be successful with a task.	◯	◯	◯

CLT PRINCIPLE

Any Focus on Form Should be Input-Oriented and Meaning-Based

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I understand why the profession has moved away from grammar teaching to input enhancement and focus on form.	○	○	○
2. I can explain the difference between teaching grammar and input enhancement.	○	○	○
3. I can describe at least two of the input enhancement/focus on form techniques widely used in language teaching.	○	○	○
4. I understand that input enhancement and focus on form can only aid acquisition, they can't cause it.	○	○	○
5. I can explain what I'm looking for in terms of online and out-of-class materials for students related to grammar.	○	○	○

The principle at the center of this chapter centers on current ideas about "how to handle grammar" in the contemporary communicative and proficiency-oriented classroom:

Any focus on form—that is, somehow drawing learners' attention to aspects of language—should be input-oriented as opposed to traditional presentation + practice orientations. In addition, all focus on form should be couched within meaning-making.

This chapter includes:

- *A brief review of acquisition of "grammar."*
- *The rationale for input enhancement and focus on form.*
- *Examples of different techniques for input enhancement and focus on form.*

Particularly vexing for language teaching is the question of what to do with so-called "grammar." People are very opinionated on this matter—and not just teachers. Students, too, often voice opinions about what should happen in language classes. Here's a recent comment I read on an instructor's semester-end evaluation for a third-semester Spanish course.

> "This course was awful. We didn't learn anything new. In high school, we learned new tenses all the time. In this class, we didn't learn any tenses."

This type of comment (OK, I paraphrased a bit to ensure anonymity) is something I read every semester. It reflects the idea that somehow language acquisition involves the model "presentation + practice": the student expects to receive both presentation and explanation from the teacher, followed by a series of practices designed to help the student "master the material." The student then takes a test on the material, and, *voilà!* Learning.

Where do students get this idea? Is there a manual somewhere for students that says, "Here's how to learn a language"? There isn't. Teachers and textbooks pass this model of "learning" on to students, and it forms part of the assumed way language acquisition happens. And, of course, parents, administrators, and others play supporting roles in this scenario, especially when certain kinds of tests are used as yardsticks for teacher and school assessment or evaluation.

However, some teachers eschew the explicit teaching of grammar. Either from research or experience, they have concluded that focusing on grammar in language teaching does little to advance either acquisition or communicative ability in their students. Online programs sometimes take a similar stance when they tell us to learn a new language the same way we learned our first language: "naturally." And some approaches to language teaching remove explicit instruction and practice in grammar (e.g., TPRS, content-based instruction and immersion).

Which position is correct? Is there some middle ground? To address these questions, let's review basic facts about language and language acquisition from chapters 2 and 3:

- *Language is abstract and complex.* In truth, it is too abstract and complex to teach and learn explicitly. As we said, what's on page 32 of the textbook is not what winds up in anyone's head. There is no mechanism that turns explicit "rules" into the abstract, complex mental representation we call "language." (Remember the water and oil metaphor?)

- *Acquisition is slow and piecemeal.* The child takes some 14,500 hours or more by age six to master the basics of the adult system. Second language acquisition is equally slow

and piecemeal. Moreover, people don't acquire one thing and then move on to another, as typical syllabi and textbooks suggest. People's minds are constantly working on various aspects of language simultaneously such that a little bit of one thing is penciled in while a little bit of something else is also penciled in. Only over time does the system build up and begin to resemble the second language.

- *Acquisition is stage-like and ordered.* In the acquisition of any structure (e.g., negation, question formation, copular verbs in Spanish, object pronouns in French, gender agreement) there are stages all learners go through. In addition, learners seem to gain control over individual elements in a fixed order (e.g., in English, the verbal inflections are acquired in this order: *-ing* —> past tense —> third-person *–s*). There is no evidence that stages can be skipped or orders altered; attempts to do so have failed.

As the research on the above points emerged, scholars began to ask, "Can instruction influence acquisition? What role does instruction play in these observations?" The research has led us to three more basic facts:

- *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, nor does it affect the piecemeal nature of acquisition. Whether instructed or not, learners work out bits and pieces of "the grammar" as mental representation evolves over time. (And, to drive the point home, the bits and pieces are not those found in textbooks.)

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

- *Input provides the data for acquisition.* Language that learners hear and see in communicative contexts forms the data on which the internal mechanisms operate. Nothing can substitute for input.

Given these observations—once again, these are empirical observations, not beliefs—we may conclude that the teaching (and practice) of traditional grammar does little to foster acquisition. Powerful internal forces mitigate any attempts by teachers, learners, and textbooks to induce mental representation in learners. That is, the explicit learning and teaching of traditional grammar does little to assist the development of the *implicit, abstract*, and *complex* mental representation that is language. This representation does not come about by purposeful focus on "grammar." On the other hand, the explicit learning and teaching of traditional grammar is useful for test taking—fill-in-the-blank, select the correct answer, and any other standardized paper-and-pencil test on Spanish, Japanese, or Arabic,

for example. Because these are tests of explicit knowledge, of course, explicit knowledge plus practice is likely to help learners in their performance.

But acquisitionists measure implicit learning, not explicit learning. They are interested in the underlying mental representation. Why? Because models of communication and language use require an implicit mental representation as their foundation. That is, we speak and use implicit, not explicit, language in everyday performance—even if we have explicit knowledge! Sure, learners can think and self-correct if they have the time and reason to. But the kernel of every spontaneous sentence of any learner comes from the implicit system. The explicit system is, at best, window-dressing.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for speaking suggest that at the lowest levels of ability, learners are limited to learned material and memorized language. Indeed, when one listens to a Novice-speaker, one gets the impression that the speaker is putting together sentences based on explicitly learned "material." Does this mean we're wrong about the implicit system being the foundation of speaking? No. The Guidelines are descriptions of performance, not underlying representation. One interpretation of performance over time is this: When pushed to communicate at early levels, learners are forced to work with explicitly learned material, because their implicit system is so limited. In the meantime, the implicit system builds up from input. Eventually, the implicit system "takes over," and the explicit system becomes obsolete. The explicit system does not become the implicit system, just like a baby tooth does not become an adult tooth. The baby tooth is pushed out by the adult tooth and falls away as the adult tooth emerges to take on the function the baby tooth had.

For almost all scholars, explicit teaching is fine if explicit knowledge is your goal. But if acquisition and communication are your goal, explicit teaching is not the best use of your time. That does not mean, however, that some scholars haven't thought about how acquisition of language might be facilitated—assuming it could be. Because of the internal constraints on acquisition and the fundamental role of input, some scholars hit upon two overlapping ideas for instruction. One is called "input enhancement." The other is called "focus on form." And that's where we're headed now.

Input Enhancement and Focus on Form

Acknowledging that input, not explanation + practice, is the data for language acquisition, is it possible to help acquisition along? We can't alter stages or ordered development. We can't override the internal mechanisms that guide and constrain acquisition. We can't alter the piecemeal nature of acquisition. So what might be possible? We can start by asking ourselves the following:

- What aspects of language do learners seem to have trouble with, and which ones are "easy"?

- If we can't alter natural processes, can we speed them up in some way?

For the first question, we don't mean the aspects of language teachers typically consider difficult because they see learners struggle on paper-and-pencil tests. And we don't mean those aspects that are different from what is found in the first language. We mean those aspects of language that seem difficult based on acquisition data.

Let's take the case of verbal forms in English. Learners easily acquire *–ing* (as in "He's writing now") and don't need to be taught anything about this form. Later they learn past-tense *–ed* (as in "He talked too much"), which suggests it is more difficult than *–ing*. Finally, learners get third-person *–s* (as in "He talks a good game"). Aquisitionally, third-person *–s* must be the most difficult. Ironically, it's the easiest to teach and learn explicitly). What could be easier than "If you talk about someone else, add an *–s* to the verb"? But in terms of actually acquiring this verb form, learners seem to struggle.

Let's take another example. Do you remember the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* in Spanish as a second language from Chapter 3? *Ser* and *estar* are the two verbs that mean 'to be,' as in *Soy latino* ('I'm Latino') and *Estoy bien* ('I'm fine'). We saw that learners easily acquire *ser*, then easily acquire *estar* as an auxiliary with progressive, as in *Estoy escribiendo* ('I'm writing.') Yet it takes longer to acquire the appropriate use of *estar* with adjectives that typically depict conditions and states with beginning or end points, as in *Estoy contento* ('I'm happy') and *Está muerto* ('He's dead'). In fact, learners may "struggle" for years with the appropriate use of *estar* with adjectives. Thus, for learners of Spanish the acquisition

"problem" is not "the uses of *ser* and the uses of *estar*." The problem is the underlying nature of *estar* and the adjectives with which it combines.

So "difficulty in acquisition" refers to aspects of language that take a long time to acquire or are protracted in their acquisition. Now, we can't make learners acquire third-person *–s* before *–ing* or *estar* before *ser*. The second question, then, is whether we can speed up the acquisition of these more difficult features of language. Enter **input enhancement** and **focus on form**.

Input enhancement, originally coined by Michael Sharwood Smith, refers to any attempt by instructors to draw learner attention to more difficult aspects of language by **manipulating input**. The last phrase is key: manipulating input. With input enhancement, the focus is on input, not explanation, not practice, and not production. The goal of input enhancement is to make features of language **more salient** to learners. Here are some examples:

- *Adding emphasis on a word while speaking.* For example, the class is engaged in a discussion about a colleague's schedule. At one point the instructor says "No, he *leaves* at 5:00, not *arrives*," emphasizing the verbs and perhaps slightly lengthening the final consonant that indicates third-person. (Note: the teacher is actually emphasizing content, but in doing so he is making the verbs more salient through stress and pitch.)

- *Bolding, color coding, or otherwise "highlighting" particular things in written text.* Again, the class discusses a colleague's schedule. The teacher displays a brief description with the third-person verbs highlighted: "Alex **leaves** at 5:00. He **takes** the 5:15 train and arrives home at 6:00. He **greets** his dog. His dog is always happy to see him. He **takes** the dog for walk, then **returns** and **prepares** dinner…" The bolding draws the learners' attention to the verbs and, hopefully, heightens the salience of the ending as well.

Two things about input enhancement are important to remember. The first is that learners are working with input, not practicing language in the traditional sense. Their primary focus is on meaning, trying to interpret input for its content. The enhancement is secondary. That is, the teacher does not focus on third-person *–s* in the passage about Alex above, but on what Alex does every day. The teacher does not use the paragraph to stop and say, "OK. Let's look at how the third-person is formed. Repeat after me." Instead, the teacher engages the students in the content of the passage: "OK. What can we deduce about Alex? Does he live far or close to work?" ["Far!"] "Why far? Because he takes…" ["The train!"] "Right, he takes the train. And how long is the trip home? Thirty-five minutes, or 45 minutes?" ["Forty-five minutes!"] "Right. The trip is 45 minutes. He takes the train at 5:15, and he arrives home at 6:00. That's 45 minutes." And so on. The teacher leaves it to the learner's internal processes to make note of the bolded items because the teacher knows that acquisition can't be forced.

The jury is out on the relative benefits of input enhancement. Does it speed up language acquisition? In her book *Input Enhancement: From Theory and Research to the Classroom*, Wynne Wong says some studies indicate that it does, others have shown it to be partially helpful, and others have concluded that input enhancement seems to have no effect. The reasons for these different results may be the nature of the linguistic feature, the kind of input (paragraph level versus sentence level, simple sentences versus complex sentences), and of course, individual differences in how learners "pay attention" to input.

Nonetheless, input enhancement is easy to use, it keeps a focus on meaning in language, it provides content for classroom discussion and interaction, and it can be used out of class in online environments. Clearly it's not harmful as long as the focus stays on meaning. So why not include input enhancement in the teacher's toolbox of non-intrusive ways to foster acquisition? As long as educators don't slip into using it to explicitly teach grammar, and as long as they keep their sights on the roles of input and meaning-making in the communicative classroom, there's nothing wrong with making use of input enhancement.

Focus on form can be called a type of input enhancement but was developed as a separate idea by Michael Long. The idea behind focus on form is that during a communicative event, **teachers might draw learners' attention to some property of language in a way that does not break communicative flow**. Unlike input enhancement in its original concept, focus on form is not pre-planned or purposeful. It arises incidentally during a communicative interaction.

The most typical focus on form is a **recast**. A recast is a natural repetition of what learners say that doesn't interfere with communication. Here is one example:

LEARNER: He come home early.
INSTRUCTOR: Yes, he comes home early. Then what does he do?

The teacher unobtrusively recasts what the learner says in a native-like way, but not to correct—to affirm the learner's message and to continue with the conversation. By contrast, an explicit error correction might be, "Not 'come,' *comes*. Remember to add the 's' sound." The recast provides additional input in a communicative context, whereas the error correction is explicit information. And as we have discussed, explicit information cannot become mental representation.

A focus on form might also arise incidentally when meaning needs to be negotiated. What if a teacher is unsure of what a learner says? The following exchange is one example:

LEARNER: He come home early.
INSTRUCTOR: You mean every day? Every day he comes home early?
LEARNER: No, uh, yesterday.
INSTRUCTOR: Oh! You mean yesterday he *came* home early! OK. I got it now.

In this interchange, the teacher initially thinks the learner is talking about a daily routine, so she does a clarification check to make sure she understands. When the learner sees that meaning is not clear, he indicates he was talking about a previous day. The teacher then has an "ah ha" moment and indicates comprehension with her statement. According to focus on form, this negotiation may draw learner attention to an aspect of language through a natural facet of communication: clarifying meaning. In a nutshell, any attempt to negotiate meaning could be a focus on form. (You might want to review the idea of negotiation of meaning from Chapter 1.)

> **"Focus on form is not pre-planned. It arises incidentally during a communicative interaction."**

As these examples show, focus on form does not derail the teacher from a primary focus on meaning. What people are trying to say never leaves the center of the communicative event. *How* they are saying something comes into play as the two speakers work toward mutual understanding. Thus, as with input enhancement, focus on form fits within the parameters of how acquisition happens:

1. The event is couched within some kind of communicative interaction; it is not an "explicit teaching moment."

2. Somewhere in the interaction, the learner receives focused input that may provide more data for the internal mechanisms responsible for acquisition.

Focus on form, as well as negotiation of meaning more generally, have been widely researched in SLA. As with input enhancement, it is not clear to what extent such events actually "speed up" or "help" acquisition. But, also like input enhancement, they don't hurt. And they clearly fit within two major constructs within acquisition: the centrality of meaning and the centrality of input (and appropriate interaction with that input).

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

The purpose of both input enhancement and focus on form is to help language acquisition processes. This contrasts sharply with traditional approaches to teaching grammar (presentation + practice), where the purpose is to force learning in some way. But as we've said repeatedly, we can't force the learning of mental representation—or the learning of communication, for that matter. We can only provide opportunities for it to develop. And this is an exciting way to conceptualize language teaching!

Structured Input

Input enhancement and focus on form are relatively easy tools teachers can use. It doesn't take much to come up with a text with bolded or highlighted features, or to "act on the fly" and negotiate meaning. In this section, we are going to examine **structured input**, a highly researched intervention that requires much more preparation on the part of the teacher, thus is much harder to include in any curriculum. Yet the research on structured input is very promising.

Structured input is actually part of **processing instruction**, a pedagogical intervention I pioneered in the early 1990s. Processing instruction recognizes that learners must somehow process input data as an initial stage of acquisition. How do they do this? **What linguistic strategies do they take to the task of trying to comprehend a sentence?** And if we can understand these strategies, then can we fashion an intervention that pushes learners to process something they wouldn't normally process, thus pushing acquisition along? To be clear, by "processing," we mean **linking form and meaning during comprehension**. Most grammatical forms carry meaning. For example, *-ed* on the end of a verb in English means "pastness." Cases on nouns in Russian, German, and Turkish are cues to who does what to whom. This is basic sentence meaning.

> **"Processing instruction recognizes that one of the initial stages of acquisition is that learners have to somehow process input data.**

How do they do this?”

Processing instruction recognizes a number of strategies. We will focus on just one. The **Lexical Preference Principle** (LPP) says that learners “skip” certain aspects of language while processing sentences because they don’t need those aspects to comprehend a particular meaning. Their comprehension can be successful because they pay attention to vocabulary. The best example comes from something like past tense marking. In English, regular verbs mark past tense with some version of *–ed* in spoken speech. If you say these three words out loud and listen closely, you will hear that the *–ed* is pronounced differently each time: *talked* (sounds like ‘talkt’), *paid* (sounds like ‘payd’) and *pounded* (sounds like ‘poundid’). The idea behind the LPP is that learners can get the idea of “pastness” from other sources, namely context or lexical items (hence, “lexical preference”). Words like *yesterday, last week*, and *earlier* all signal pastness, and, according to research, learners first zero in on content words to get pastness and only much later—if at all—begin to process past tense endings. In a sense, lexical words that encode tense get in the way of learners processing tense on verbs during the initial stages of acquisition.

As an intervention, processing instruction begins by providing sentences stripped of any reference to tense. How does this work? Here are some examples.

Listen as your instructor says a sentence. Then indicate when you think the action occurs.

1. a. every day	**b.** last night	**c.** next week
2. a. every night	**b.** this morning	**c.** later on

[more items like this]

Teacher’s script:

1. I watched the news.
2. I wash dishes.

[more items like this in which sentences are mixed up in terms of tense]

Listen as your instructor says a sentence. Then indicate what would naturally follow.

1. **a.** So why does he have it inhis kitchen?
b. So why did he order it with lunch?
2. **a.** Really? Who are you inviting?
b. Really? Who did you invite?

Teacher’s script:

1. My buddy hates tea.

2. I prepared a great meal.

[more items like this in which sentences are mixed up in terms of tense]

In these initial activities, nothing in the sentence gives the time frame for the event except the verb. There is no context. There is no adverb like *yesterday* or *tomorrow*. Learners are pushed to process the verb endings to find cues to when things occur. These are called **referential structured input activities**. They are *input* because the learner is not producing anything but instead trying to comprehend sentences. They are *structured* because the input is manipulated to push learners to process something they might miss otherwise. They are *referential* because they have an immediate right or wrong answer.

After referential activities, teachers may use **affective structured input activities**. In *affective* activities, the teacher merely uses the form in focus in a structured way to elicit information about students or to elicit their opinions, beliefs and attitudes.

So, for example, once learners begin to accurately process tense on verbs after, say, four or five referential activities such as those above, the teacher might move to an affective activity like the following:

The following is a series of activities about what I may or may not have done last night after leaving the office. I will say them for you as you read along. Working with the person next to you, after we review them, indicate which ones you think I actually did.

1. I walked my dog.
2. I corrected papers.
3. I ordered Chinese food.
4. I watched Rachel Maddow.
5. I worked out at the gym.
6. I talked to my sister on the phone.
7. I paid bills.
8. I cleaned something.
9. I planned my day for tomorrow.
10. I plugged my phone in to charge.

[After students indicate their responses, the teacher does a poll, reading sentences aloud again providing more aural input, and seeing what the students think the teacher did. Once the correct actions are revealed, I then ask the students to put them in the order in which they think I did them. The result is a “test” of how well students know their teacher.]

This activity has no right or wrong answers. As the students work through it, they operate on what they *think* is true. Only after they begin to share answers do students

actually find out the truth. This is why we call this an affective activity: it utilizes students' ideas, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes.

Unlike other techniques used to foster the development of formal properties of language, structured input focuses on processing problems in the input. That is, it does not start with a simple statement like "Learners have a hard time with past tense," but with the questions "Why do learners have a hard time with past tense? What is going on during input processing that is inhibiting learners from linking form with meaning?" For that reason, structured input is tied to a model of input processing, and, unlike input enhancement and focus on form, for example, it zeroes in on an actual processing issue.

Now you may say, "Well, structured input activities don't look that hard to develop. What's he talking about?" Development of good structured input activities involves the following questions:

- What are the strategies learners take to the task of processing input sentences? What aspects of language are affected by the LPP? Not all. So are there other strategies? How do these affect how learners "miss" or "get things wrong" in the input? For example, what makes the processing of case in German difficult for learners (and it is; they routinely skip over case-marking on articles for some time, even after explanation + practice)? Why do learners think "The dog was chased by the cat" means that the dog was chasing the cat, and not the other way around? Why do learners not "hear" adjective agreement endings in Spanish?

- How do I structure the input to ensure that learners are pushed to process the grammatical form or structure in question? How do I make sure I don't inadvertently give cues to meaning that aren't related to the grammatical form in question? (There are specific guidelines for developing structured input activities.)

- How do I not let my pre-existing ideas about grammar instruction and education slip into the development of structured input activities? How do I keep them from degenerating into some kind of Exercise (see Chapter 5) in which I lose sight of the need to process meaning and not just form? How do I keep structured input activities from being "rote" in nature?

What structured input and processing instruction require is **a solid understanding of how learners process input** (linguistic strategies) and **how these strategies intersect with language-specific grammatical form and structures**. To illustrate, here's one more example. A processing strategy called the **First-noun Principle (FNP)** says: *Learners tend to tag the first noun or pronoun they encounter in the sentence as the subject or agent of the sentence.* When a learner hears "The dog chased the cat," the learner assumes the dog is the subject and agent (doer) of the action of chasing. Great! But when the learner hears

“The dog was chased by the cat” the learner also assumes the dog is the subject (correct!) and agent (incorrect!) of the action of chasing. So for a long time a learner can continue to misinterpret passive sentences by getting them wrong when hearing them in the input. Teaching and practicing them generally doesn’t overcome this, but our research on structured input has shown that it does. But how would you know this is the problem with passives if you didn’t know the FNP and how it intersects with actives versus passives?

Here’s another example for German teachers. Even after explicit learning, students don’t process case-marking in the input. They don’t hear the difference between *Der Mann* (subject) and *Den Mann* (object) in sentences such as *Der Mann hört die Frau* (‘The man hears the woman’) and *Die Frau hört den Mann* (‘The woman hears the man’). How do we know this? Because German allows object-verb-subject sentences, and if we give learners the sentence *Den Mann hört die Frau* (‘The woman hears the man’) where the object appears in the first position, they think it means the man hears the woman! Why? Because the learners are relying on the FNP, so they can skip or ignore case-marking because it becomes “redundant” in sentences that are subject-verb-object word order. Again, our research shows that processing instruction and structured input can help with this.

In short, providing structured input is quite different from what is required to formulate a recast or create an enhanced text for use in class. Unfortunately, then, one of the more researched interventions is the least likely to get used, because it’s cumbersome and requires substantial background knowledge for teachers. And it takes time to create activities. Still, it’s possible! Just read some of the sources in the **Foundational Readings** to find out how.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Structured input activities, at least referential ones, are great for online work outside of class. This may be also true for text enhancement. Unfortunately, many online materials do not involve focus on form or input enhancement, but presentation + practice. Some of my students have called these materials "busy work." Think about how great it would be if the online materials at your fingertips actually dovetailed with what you wanted to do in class and incorporated insights from language, communication, and language acquisition research.

At this point some of you might be saying, "But can't you just teach them these things (i.e., grammatical forms), and that will take care of the problem?" No. Acquisition happens through an interaction of input with internal mechanisms that process data from the input. Nothing replaces input and the processing of input. Nor do explicit teaching and practice necessarily speed up processing.

Other Possibilities

Are there other tools that teachers might use to push acquisition along without losing sight of meaning and the role of input? In this section, we will explore three other possibilities: input flood, dictogloss, and input-output cycles.

Input flood is a relatively simple concept: All you do is saturate your input with whatever you want to push along. We know, for example, that the internal mechanisms for language partially respond to frequency. In most languages the present tense is at least twice as frequent as the past tense, which increases the odds of present tense entering the learner's representation of language sooner than past tense (even though the piecemeal nature of acquisition tells us learners are working on both simultaneously). One way, then, to push past tense along is simply to use it more. This is what input flood refers to. The teacher does not attempt to highlight the form or structure in question, which makes input flood different from input enhancement. The idea is: If we increase the frequency, we increase

the opportunities for learners to process the form in the input.

To be sure, some things are easy for input flood, while others are harder. Try to imagine flooding the input with something like the passive voice in English: “John was kissed by Mary. He was surprised by her action. Mary was embarrassed by the look on his face.” Imagine four more passive sentences following. This would sound a bit weird, wouldn’t it? The point is, not all techniques and interventions are equally useable. Teachers can pick and choose depending on what will work with what form or structure at what time.

Dictogloss is another technique some teachers use to push acquisition of form and structure along. Dictogloss is not the same as dictation, although the first and last steps of a dictogloss and a dictation look similar. Dictations are used to practice spelling, and learners simply write down exactly what they think they hear. With dictogloss, learners work in pairs to reconstruct what they thought they heard. Here are the steps of a dictogloss:

Step 1. The teacher establishes the topic and might even say something like “You will hear some [name a structure] in this passage. So be on the lookout for those.” If there is any vocabulary the teacher needs to prep, she can do so at this time.

Step 2. The teacher reads a short passage twice. The passage length depends on the language level of the learner, but the shorter the better. Embedded are several examples of the form or structure the teacher wishes to push along. At this time, students are told to pay attention as best they can. Some teachers allow them to take notes, but students are not to copy what they hear (this is not a dictation!).

Step 3. Students work in pairs to reconstruct what they believe they heard. They write it out together.

Step 4. The teacher calls on a pair of students to present their passage. Does everyone have the same thing? What does another pair have that’s different? What parts were hard to remember? These are some of the questions the teacher uses during this step to focus on the content.

Step 5. The teacher reveals the original passage (on a PowerPoint presentation, on a handout, or some other way) and then leads a class discussion about what in the passage was missed or what was difficult to understand.

Step 6. The class engages in discussion about the content of the passage, centered on the question, “What have we learned in this short passage about this topic?”

As you might guess, step 3 is designed to push students to pay close attention during step 2, where the input contains the embedded exemplars of the form or structure. During

the pair interaction and the follow-up, the teacher can see if students were picking up on the new form. Step 6 is required to make sure meaning is somehow involved in the process. Otherwise, steps 1 through 5 can devolve into a kind of practice with grammar without attention to meaning. We don't want that; remember, language is learned via communicatively-based input. If meaning is not involved, acquisition can be bypassed—and we don't want to bypass acquisition. Acquisition is central to our endeavors.

Let's consider passage length for a moment. A Google search for 'dictogloss' reveals guidelines for length, depending on whether learners are beginners, intermediates, or advanced. For beginners, a dictogloss passage should be extremely short—something like three sentences, five to eight words maximum per sentence. This does not give much room for embedding a form or structure, but the relatively low ability of beginners necessitates a very short passage. Here are examples of dictogloss passages on the same topic, and how they might vary depending on level. (Note the embedding of passive sentences as our example.)

BEGINNER: "Dogs make good pets. They are easily trained. They are more easily trained than cats."

INTERMEDIATE: "Dogs are good pets and are man's best friend. They are easily trained. Some are trained to be entertainers. They are more easily trained than cats. This is why you see more dogs than cats in shows."

ADVANCED: "Dogs are excellent pets. They are easily trained if you know how. Most dogs can be trained with treats and snacks. Some dogs can be trained with toys. There are other ways to train dogs, but all are trained with some kind of reward."

My research on dictogloss suggests that it is less useful for lower and intermediate learners than for advanced learners. It is also more useful for language elements learners have already been exposed to but are struggling with. Finally, **dictogloss results not in acquisition but in explicit learning**—precisely that which cannot become acquisition. As learners engage in Step 3—their pair work—they often engage in talk about language and develop conscious knowledge about the structure or form in question. Teachers who believe that learners need to engage in some kind of explicit learning will find dictogloss to their liking. But, again, the question is to what extent this kind of activity aids acquisition. With these caveats in mind, dictogloss can be used as an occasional tool to push acquisition along, as long as teachers don't miss that crucial Step 6.

Input-output cycles are similar to dictogloss but typically involve written texts. Instead of text reconstruction, they use questions to push learners to focus on particular forms or structure. Here are the steps for an input-output cycle:

Step 1. The teacher distributes (or displays) a text with a particular form or structure embedded in it throughout. The text should be a topic with which learners have some familiarity but not so much that they won't learn new information by reading it. Text length depends on level of learner, but a good rule of thumb is never to go beyond 250 words.

Step 2. After students read the text, it is taken away and they receive a series of questions to answer. Some of the questions require use of the targeted form or structure. During this step, learners determine whether they "have the structure or not."

Step 3. Students put their answers away. The teacher returns the text so students can read it again. Once they have reread it, the teacher takes the text away.

Step 4. The students return to their answers and make any changes in content or grammar as needed based on their second reading of the text.

Step 5. The teacher and class review the answers together and also engage in a more general discussion of the content, finding out what new information about the world was learned.

To provide an example, here is an excerpt from a passage in which passive structures is embedded. Following the passage is a corresponding question designed to focus the learner's attention on the passive sentences upon rereading.

"The pyramids of Giza were built by the Egyptians thousands of years ago. They were made of stone blocks, mostly. Mud bricks were used, too. In Mexico and Guatemala, there are also pyramids. These were built by the Mayans…."

Question: "Describe the construction of the pyramids at Giza."

Learners could answer the question as follows: "The Egyptians used stone or mud bricks." Yet upon rereading, they might be inclined to go back and change the answer to "They were built with stone and mud bricks." But they might not. This is one of the pitfalls of input-output cycles: How do you get students to use the targeted form? Perhaps you don't have to. If they answer the question correctly, this means they processed the information in the text, hence probably the structure. Maybe. Remember, learners don't always process sentences as we think they do. They can sometimes get meaning from the input without completely relying on structure. If they read "Egyptians" "pyramids" and "stone bricks" and know what these words mean, they can infer everything else. (After all, people built pyramids; pyramids didn't build people.)

Still, there is some evidence that input-output cycles can be useful if structured carefully.

And, like the other interventions we have reviewed in this chapter, they clearly focus on meaning, involve input, and engage learners in using language to learn new information. This is the cornerstone of acquisition.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Dictogloss and input-output cycles are favored by teachers (and scholars) who believe that talking is important for learning. They are also favored by teachers and scholars who believe that explicit knowledge is useful for acquisition. Research on both techniques is limited, so it's unclear what they do, if anything, for language acquisition. If you want to try them, limit them to more advanced levels of language and use the input-oriented techniques for novice and intermediate learners.

Implications for Language Instruction

The focus of this chapter has been that any focus on form (grammatical form, grammatical structure) in the classroom must be input-based and meaning-oriented. This idea derives from what we know about acquisition and its relationship to communicative settings as opposed to explanation + practice. A first implication from what we know, then, is this:

Focus on form is not a singular thing. There is no one way to do it. Instructors have options.

Focusing on form comes in a variety of techniques, and there are others not presented here. Teachers are free to explore how to focus on form in the communicative classroom. Remember, there is no one method of communicative language teaching. Instead, there should be principles that guide teachers in decision-making for fashioning their own curricula. Likewise, understanding the parameters for focusing on form lets teachers make decisions about what to do and when to do it. We are now ready for the next implication:

Because we can focus on form does not mean we have to.

The research on focus on form has yielded mixed outcomes. One of the problems with the research is the way scholars measure outcomes of the intervention. Just how do we know acquisition has happened after an intervention? Some scholars have argued that the research on focus on form contains a huge bias toward explicit testing and tapping of

explicit knowledge. Furthermore, given what we know about the slow and piecemeal nature of acquisition, focus on form can hardly cause instantaneous acquisition of a particular property of language.

But researchers and teachers still insist that we can make a difference in acquisition by focusing on grammar. After all, isn't that what instruction is supposed to do? I would argue that we *are* making a difference by offering a communicatively-oriented curriculum. Given how both language grows in the mind and communication develops over time, a communicative and proficiency-oriented classroom is already doing what it must do: helping the learner's internal processes.

With the above in mind, let me offer an afterthought instead of an implication:

Because class time is precious and is needed for the input and interaction that fuels communicative development and language acquisition, teachers should explore ways to use input enhancement and focus on form outside of class.

Technology can be a wonderful thing. It can free teachers from explicit teaching and practice. The research makes it clear that working through focus on form activities outside of class is just as beneficial, if not more so, than doing so during class. The result is more class time for a focus on input and communication. However, teachers will be disappointed if they look to commercially published materials for informed approaches to dealing with formal features of language outside of class. As we have shown in this chapter, input enhancement manipulates input in some way to draw learner attention to formal features of language while the learner's primary attention is on meaning. Focus on form refers to drawing learner attention to formal aspects of language during communication without breaking the flow of communication.

So one of the outcomes of this chapter is to provide teachers with questions to ask about online materials: What do they look like? What approach to form do these materials take? Do they meet the criteria for input enhancement and focus on form outlined in this chapter?

Foundational Readings

Doughty, C., & Williams, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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Krashen, S. (2003). *Explorations in language acquisition and use: The Taipei lectures*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Norris, J., & Ortega, L. (2000). Effectiveness of L2 instruction: A research synthesis and quantitative meta-analysis. *Language Learning, 50*, 417-528.

Sharwood Smith, M. (1993). Input enhancement in instructed SLA: Theoretical bases. *Studies in Second language acquisition, 15*, 165-179.

VanPatten, B. (2015). Foundations of processing instruction. *International Review of Applied Linguistics, 53*, 91-109.

Wong, W. (2005). *Input enhancement: From theory and research to the classroom.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Discussion Questions and Food for Thought

1. Review the chapter and make a list of all bolded or italicized words (except non-English words), terms and concepts. Can you define each one or explain what it means? Can you give examples of your definitions?
2. Which of the input enhancement techniques or focus-on-form interventions do you see being able to use in the classroom? Why did you select this particular technique or techniques?
3. One of the criticisms of online materials is that they are mere grammar exercises with virtually no input enhancement or focus on form activities. Select a textbook and examine its accompanying online materials. What does it ask students to do with "grammar"? Is the criticism in this chapter accurate?
4. Input enhancement and focus on form are not new ways to *teach* grammar. Explain what this means.
5. Let's imagine you are starting a new unit called "What we did last night, and what that says about us." Your first Activity in class is to tell students the following:

   "OK, Class. I'm going to tell you five things I did last night [writes what last night means in the first language on the board]. Last night. Ready?

   1) I watched the news.
   2) I prepared dinner.
   3) I walked my dog.
   4) I read my email.
   5) I called my sister on the phone.

   OK. Let's see what you remember:

   - Who did I call on the phone?
   - What did I drink?
   - What did I watch on TV?

   Excellent good memory!

   OK. Look up here on the screen. [the same five activities are on the screen] OK. With

someone next to you, I'm giving you two minutes to put these activities in the order in which I did them. Go ahead. One through five…."

Also imagine this is the first time students are exposed to the past tense in the language you teach. How much do you have to explain about the past tense before you launch into this? Anything? All of it? Just a little bit? Think carefully about how this unit starts!

6. Select one of the chapters in Wynne Wong's book that focuses on an input enhancement technique. What does she say about the research support for that technique? The book was published in 2005, so some time has passed since then. How could you find additional empirical evidence to support Wong's conclusions?

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I understand why the profession has moved away from grammar teaching to input enhancement and focus on form.	○	○	○
2. I can explain the difference between teaching grammar and input enhancement.	○	○	○
3. I can describe at least two of the input enhancement/focus on form techniques widely used in language teaching.	○	○	○
4. I understand that input enhancement and focus on form can only aid acquisition, they can't cause it.	○	○	○
5. I can explain what I'm looking for in terms of online and out-of-class materials for students related to grammar.	○	○	○

Wait! Before You Read the Epilogue…

Remember the “I…” self-assessment at the very beginning of this book? Well, here it is again. As I said, it’s a good idea to compare pre- and post-reading self-assessment. Did anything change? How do you feel about the things you read in this book now?

For each statement below, indicate which of the three options best applies to you right now.

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I can offer a working definition of communication.	○	○	○
2. I can describe the two major purposes of communication.	○	○	○
3. I understand how the classroom is a "limited context" environment for communication.	○	○	○
4. I can describe/explain how knowledge about communication informs choices and behaviors in terms of language teaching.	○	○	○
5. I understand what it means for language to be abstract.	○	○	○
6. I understand what it means for language to be complex.	○	○	○
7. I understand the sentence "What's on page 32 of the textbook is not what winds up in your head."	○	○	○
8. I can list the basic characteristics of language acquisition.	○	○	○
9. I understand that instruction cannot alter acquisition processes.	○	○	○
10. I can offer examples of linguistic development in learners over time.	○	○	○
11. I can offer a definition of "input" and give examples.	○	○	○
12. I can describe how to make input comprehensible.	○	○	○
13. I understand that input is not a technique, but is foundational to the communicative curriculum.	○	○	○
14. I understand the difference between talking "at" and talking "with" learners.	○	○	○
15. I can state the difference between an Exercise, an Activity, and a Task.	○	○	○
16. I understand the difference between an input-oriented Task and an output-oriented Task.	○	○	○
17. I understand why the profession has moved away from grammar teaching to input enhancement and focus on form.	○	○	○
18. I can explain the difference between teaching grammar and input enhancement.	○	○	○
19. I can describe at least two of the input enhancement/focus on form techniques widely used in language teaching.	○	○	○

Epilogue

If you've made it to this epilogue, *mazel tov!* You either have been introduced to or have reviewed the basics underlying contemporary communicative and proficiency-oriented language teaching. In this epilogue, I want to leave you with a class-hour lesson so you can imagine a communicative, proficiency-oriented classroom. But before I do, I want to talk about assessment.

ACTFL has some wonderful publications on assessment, so I didn't feel the need to include a chapter on that subject. But I do want to remind you of an underlying principle of assessment that is not particular to the communicative classroom but is a good rule of thumb for all domains:

> *Test/Assess how you teach, and teach the way in which students will be tested/assessed.*

That is, if you teach communicatively but test the same old stuff, you are doomed to failure. The goals of communicative, proficiency-oriented curricula are not the goals of traditional tests. So throw those old tests out and do some research on alternatives! In Chapter 5, we talked about how you might make Tasks and can-do statements part of your assessment. But there is more you can do.

For one, you can become an expert in communicative language teaching and assessment so you can explain your position to students, parents, colleagues, and anyone else who might need convincing. Remember: everyone has experience with language learning and thinks he or she know how to do it best. Solid knowledge is your best ally in combating myths about language learning and teaching.

Now we're ready for the sample class. At the end of the last chapter on input enhancement and focus on form I asked you to imagine the first five minutes of a unit called "What we did last night, and what that says about us." I will now describe a class hour to kick off that unit so you can see what a communicative, proficiency-oriented classroom looks like. Someone else might do it differently from me, but that's the great thing about having principles as opposed to a cookbook and recipes: we let ourselves as teachers emerge along with the students to forge a focus on meaning and communication in the classroom. Classes may differ from each other, but the outcome is eventually the same.

After the lesson, I invite you sit back and reflect on it. How do you see the principles in this book playing out in this lesson? (Unfortunately, I can't indicate all the gestures, pauses, rate of speech and everything else you might see if you were in class. I also can't indicate the activities' lengths of time or the little diversions that naturally happen during a class.

You'll have to use your imagination.)

I'm presenting the class-hour lesson in English, but you can imagine how it would play out in your language—and this class hour would work for *all* languages. There is nothing about any language that would keep us from doing a lesson such as the one that follows. So read on and if you haven't encountered this kind of class before, I hope it inspires you! (By the way, I'm assuming the teacher—me—has already said "hi" to everyone as they walked in and has already passed around the role sheet for attendance. You should also know that I'm aiming for the next day to do a version of the "Sedentary or Active?" Task from Chapter 5 as a goal. I've worked backwards to come up with this lesson. And, of course, the students are all college-age as this is a university-level appropriate class.)

First day of Unit on 'What we Did Last Night, and What That Says About Us'

1. "OK, Class. I'm going to tell you five things I did last night [writes what 'last night' means in the first language on the board]. Last night. Ready? [reveals a PowerPoint slide and reviews each sentence]

I watched the news.
I prepared dinner.
I walked my dog.
I read email.
I called my sister on the phone.

OK. Let's see what you remember. [turns off the slide] Who did I call on the phone? ["Sister!"] Right. I called my sister. What did I read? ["Email!"] Right. I read email. For how long did I read email? [mumblings, no one knows] Aha! I didn't say! I read email for an hour. OK. What did I watch on TV? ["The news."] Yes. I watched the news. What news did I watch? [again, mumblings. someone shouts out, "We don't know!"] Right. You *don't* know. I watched MSNBC.

You all have an excellent memory! OK. Look up here on the screen. [the same five activities are on the screen] OK. With someone next to you, I'm giving you two minutes to put these activities in the order in which I did them. Go ahead. One through five. [students work in pairs; after two minutes the teacher calls time]

OK. Let's see what Jake and Mitch said. Did I watch the news first? ["No."] Did I prepare dinner first? ["No."] Did I walk my dog first ["Yes."] Good! When I arrived at home, I walked my dog right away. After I walked my dog, did I read email? ["Yes."] Again, great! I walked my dog, and then I read email. You guys are good! OK, after I read email, did I call my sister? ["Yes."] Oops. No. I *didn't* call my sister after I read email.

OK, Class. So now we know that I walked my dog first. Then I read email. What did I do next? Suzie and Le Anne, did I watch the news next? ["No."] No. I didn't watch the news next. Did I prepare dinner? ["Yes!"] Ding, ding, ding! Yes. I read email, and then I prepared dinner. So, here we are so far. First I walked my dog. Then I read email [someone shouts out, "For an hour!"] Yes, I read email for an hour. Thank you. Then I prepared dinner. What did I do next? Did I watch the news? Raise your hand if I watched the news. [a few hands go up] Raise your hand if I called my sister. [more hands go up] OK. Let's see what I did in what order. [puts up another slide in which the items are correctly ordered]

1) I walked my dog.
2) I read email.
3) I prepared dinner.
4) I watched the news.
5) I called my sister on the phone.

OK. So the last thing I did was call my sister on the phone. I called her at ten o'clock at night. Why did I call her at ten o'clock? Who can remember a fact about my sister? [someone says "She lives in California."] Exactly! And how many hours time difference is there between Michigan and California? ["Three hours."] Yes. Three hours. So I called my sister at ten o'clock our time but seven o'clock her time. That's a good time to call California.

2. OK. Here are some other activities I did last night. [puts up a new slide and says each out loud]

I prepared today's class.
I walked my dog a second time.
I gave my dog dinner.

OK. Working with someone next to you, see if you can figure out where these go into the order of the first five activities! You have two minutes. [after two minutes, the teacher calls time]

Let's see what Jill and Megan say. When did I prepare for class? Before or after dinner? ["After."] Good guess! Yes. First I prepared dinner. Then I ate. Then I prepared today's class. So that leaves two activities. When did I walk my dog a second time? And when did I give my dog dinner? [a student raises his hand tries to say in Spanish, "You gave your dog dinner, then you read email," but the student uses the first-person form of the verb] That is correct. I gave my dog dinner, and then I read email. Boy you really know me! By the way, in a minute we will see how to say, "You read" and "You ate." OK. So that leaves one final activity. When did I walk my dog a second time? Here are the

choices. I walked my dog, and then I called my sister. Or, I called my sister, and then I walked my dog. [a student raises hand and says, “First dog, then sister,” clearly not sure how to use past tense] Right! I walked my dog first, and then I called my sister. Do you know what time I walked my dog? [a hand shoots up: “Uh, nine o’clock?”] Good memory. You remember from my daily routine that I always walk my dog at nine o’clock at night. So last night I walked him at nine o’clock.

OK. Just to review, here are all the activities I did last night and the order in which I did them.

1) I walked my dog.
2) I gave my dog dinner.
3) I read email.
4) I prepared dinner.
5) I ate.
6) I prepared today’s class.
7) I walked my dog a second time.
8) I called my sister on the phone.
9) I watched the news.

Remember this order. You will need it. [removes slide]

3. OK, Class. To talk to someone or ask your friend a question about last night, the verb sounds like this: you read email, you ate, you gave your dog dinner, you watched the news. OK? So, here’s a new slide. [puts up new slide; the teacher reads aloud each sentence]

1) You ate.
2) You called your sister on the phone.
3) You read email.
4) You gave your dog dinner.
5) You prepared dinner.
6) You prepared today’s class
7) You walked your dog a second time.
8) You walked your dog.
9) You watched the news.

This is how you would talk to me about what I did. OK. Here’s your task. Remember the order I did everything in? Now you tell me when I did each thing. I’ll give you two minutes to prepare. [after two minutes, teacher calls time]

OK, Class. Let’s call on Kelly. Kelly, stand up. [Kelly stands up] Tell me in what order I

did everything last night. Let me give you some useful words [writes the Spanish equivalent of “first,” “next,” “then” on the board] Use these words if they help. OK. Go. [Kelly starts: “First you walked your dog.”]

Everyone agree? [heads nod, “yes”] OK. Keep going. [“Then you gave your dog dinner.”] Is that right, class? [again heads nod, some “yeses”] OK. Kelly will keep going. I won’t say anything. If she gets something wrong, raise your hand. OK? I said OK? [students say, “Yes.”] OK, Kelly. Go. [Kelly finishes her list. It was perfect, but the teacher asks anyway] OK, Class. Anything you want to correct? [“No.”] Excellent, Kelly. All of you have great memories, but we know that already, right?

4. Now we’re going to switch gears. Instead of talking about what I did, I want us to find out a couple of things about each other and last night. Look at this slide. [the teacher puts up a new slide with the following on it]

Step 1. Indicate if you did the activity last night, and how many times.

- I read email. once twice three times more than three times
- I looked at Facebook. once twice three times more than three times
- I texted someone. once twice three times more than three times

Step 2. Now interview at least two people. Find out if they did the activities from Step 1, and how often. Here are the questions to help you.

- Did you read email? once twice three times more than three times
- Did you look at Facebook? once twice three times more than three times
- Did you text someone? once twice three times more than three times

Step 3. Now take the information from Steps 1 and 2 and rate you and the people you interviewed on the following scale.

very connected		somewhat connected		not very connected
5	4	3	2	1

[The teacher walks them through the Task, and then has them do it. After about five minutes, the teacher calls the class back.]

OK. Let’s see what we’ve learned. Sam. Who did you talk to? [“Kevin and Reilly.”]

OK. So where are the three of you on the scale? [“Uh, me a 3, Reilly a 2, Kevin a 5.”] Wow. Kevin was a five? Kevin, how many times did you read email? [“Twice.”] How many times did you look at Facebook? [“Once, but for an hour.”] How many times did you text someone? [“Lots.”] Well, who did you text? [“Uh, my mom, my brother, my girlfriend, my roommate, uh, others.”] Yeah that sounds like you were pretty connected. Did you use your phone? [“Yes.”] Let’s find out some more. [teacher repeats this with most of the class; numbers are put on board. The class falls somewhere between 4 and 3, on average]

OK, Class. Now interview me with the same questions. [some are shy, no takers] Come on, Class. Let’s go. Interview me! [one student raises hand] OK, Mitch. Go.

MITCH: “Uh, you read email?”

TEACHER: “Yes.” [smiling]

MITCH: “After you walked your dog?”

TEACHER: “Right!”

MITCH: “Uh, how long? How long did you read email?”

TEACHER: “Good question. I read email for about one hour.”

Thanks, Mitch. Who’s gonna continue? [same thing happens with two different students until the second and third questions get asked and answered]

OK. So now you know a little more about what I did last night. Can you rate me on the scale of 5 to 1? How connected was I last night? [class begins to shout out some answers. Some say, “Four!” and some say, “Three!”] OK. I agree. I was probably about a three. So, how do I fit with this group? Am I like you? [they say, “Yes.”] OK. We are going to follow this up tomorrow. Please keep this information for tomorrow, OK?

5. Let’s look at this slide up here. This is from a student of mine in another class. [this is what is on the slide]

> **I got** home at 4:00. **I went** to the gym and **worked out** for an hour. **I came** home and **showered**. I **ate** pizza for dinner. Then I went to Espresso Royale. **I studied** for two hours there. After I had a beer at Hopcat with a friend. Then **I went** home. **I went to bed** at 11:00.

Let me review this with you [teacher reads it aloud as students follow along]. Anything you don’t understand? OK. Then put your powers of deduction to use. I’m going to switch to another slide and based on what you remember, I want you to answer these questions. [new slide comes up]

1) How old is this student?

2) Is the student a grad student, or an undergrad?
3) Is the student male, or female?
4) Tell me one other thing you are guessing or concluding about this student.

[students work alone for two minutes, then the teacher has students share answers with someone nearby, circulating to help with any language]

OK. What do you think? Let's start with Brittany. Brittany, how old is this student? ["21?"] Why do you say 21? ["Uh, drank a beer," but uses the first-person form of the verb; the teacher recasts] Yes, the student drank a beer last night. What's the age for drinking in Michigan? [everyone shouts out, "21!", and the teacher goes to four or five students in the class and asks, "Did you drink a beer last night?" "Are you 21?"] So the student drank a beer. But maybe the student isn't 21. Hmm. Then do you think this is a grad student, or an undergrad? Eric? ["Don't know."] Do grad students do anything different from undergrads? ["Not really."] Maybe. What did you say about gender? Is this student male or female? [some students say, "Don't know."] OK. So there are no real clues here. Any other conclusions you have about this person? ["Typical student."] Ha, ha. Yes. This student seems typical. Let's put this slide up again. [teacher reveals slide again]

I got home at 4:00. **I went** to the gym and **worked out** for an hour. **I came** home and **showered**. I **ate** pizza for dinner. Then **I went** to Espresso Royale. **I studied** for two hours there. After **I had** a beer at Hopcat with a friend. Then **I went** home. **I went to bed** at 11:00.

Here's your homework for tonight. You must ask four "typical students" what they did last night. Of course, this is in English! Write down the information [the teacher models for the student]. Bring it to class. If you don't have this information for class, you will receive a zero. Understand? Someone repeat what the assignment is. [calls on a student; the student repeats the assignment] And what happens if you don't come with this information? ["Zero."] Yes. You get a zero. Any questions before we leave?

About the Author

Bill VanPatten is Professor of Spanish at Michigan State University. He is internationally known for his work in both second language acquisition and second language teaching, having published several top-selling Spanish and French textbooks, some 120 journal articles and book chapters, a dozen edited volumes, and almost a dozen books. These include *From Input to Output: A Teacher's Guide to Second Language Acquisition* and *Dust Storm: Stories from Lubbock*, a work of fiction. Bill is host of the highly successful radio show/podcast *Tea with BVP*. For more information, visit his website at https://sites.google.com/site/bvpsla.