

Integrating Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition with On-line Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

The presentation will describe beginning on-line university foreign language courses in Chinese, Russian and Spanish which in teaching students to orally communicate in these languages employ Usage-Based Instruction (UBI). UBI is a pedagogical approach which borrowed its name, and was inspired by usage-based model of language and language acquisition. Usage-based theory of language represents a relatively novel view of language and language acquisition shared by scholars in such areas as Cognitive Linguistics and Cognitive Grammar, Construction Grammar, Corpus Linguistics, Usage-Based Linguistics, and Cognitive Perspective in Second Language Acquisition. Closely associated with this view is the Competition Model and the Theory of Connectionism. The main tenets of usage-based concept of language are: linguistic system in the mind of the language learner arises from specific exemplars of use; language is a large array of meaningful units or constructions – conventionalized pairings of form and meaning; frequency is the main determinant of language acquisition; language is learned and is learned as anything else; both L2 and L1 learning are seen as essentially similar processes and rely on a single set of language learning mechanisms. The learning mechanisms involved in language learning are rich memory, categorization, associative learning, pattern-finding, schema-formation, automatization, entrenchment, chunking, analogy and imitation. At the described university, this perspective was laid into the foundation of Usage-Based Instruction – an innovative pedagogical approach to teaching students to communicate in the target foreign language which has been successfully applied for a number of years in both face-to-face and on-line language courses. In our presentation, we will attempt to demonstrate how seamlessly this perspective can be integrated with on-line delivery. In the development of our fully on-line asynchronous language courses, we, for the most part, take advantage of Voice Thread, a cloud application which allows both students and instructors to upload, share and discuss documents, presentations, images, audio files, and videos; comment on slides by means of the microphone, webcam, text, phone or audio-file upload. Additionally, the courses rely on such tools as Blackboard Collaborate, discussion forum, assignments, and tests.

Keywords: *usage-based theory of language acquisition; usage-based instruction, on-line foreign language teaching;*

Introduction

Usage-Based Instruction (UBI) has been developed and used for a number of years at a private Midwestern university, where foreign language is an elective subject, with the purpose of making instruction for speaking in beginning language courses more efficient. It is widely known that students' main motivation in studying a foreign language is driven by their desire to orally communicate in it. (Magnan, Murphy, & Sahakyan, 2014) Although studies of outcomes of collegiate foreign language courses are scarce or out-of-date, anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that that instruction for speaking proficiency generally does not meet the target levels. "The typical American language and literature major is *lucky* (emphasis added) to achieve level 2 on the Interagency Language Roundtable scale after four years of study. Median attainment after four years of harder languages for English-speaking adults, such as Chinese, Arabic, Russian, Korean, or Japanese is only ILR 1 (Long, Gor, & Jackson, 2012, p. 100). The presentation describes an effort to make instruction for speaking more effective by applying one of the leading post-Chomskyan theoretical linguistic models, known as Usage-Based Model of Language to on-line instruction in foreign languages.

From Usage-Based Model of Language to Usage-Based Instruction

One of the unique features of Usage-Based concept of language is that it views language represented in the mind as an inventory of constructions (Croft and Cruse, p. 225.) defined as conventional,



learned form-function pairings/mappings pairings/mappings at varying levels of complexity and abstraction (Goldberg, 2013). Form in constructions refers to any combination of phonological, syntactic, morphological patterns and *meaning* includes lexical semantics, pragmatics, and discourse function. Constructions exist at all levels of language, i.e., include: words, morphemes, idioms, partially lexically filled and fully general phrasal patterns. Everything that speakers know, can be recast as knowledge of constructions (Hilpert, 2014), knowledge of language is knowledge of constructions, and language acquisition is learning of constructions (Ellis and Cadierno (2009, p. 117). In the UBI, constructions are used as units of learning and the main feature of the UBI instructional sequence is that it relies on lexically specific and thematically organized constructions that serve as the primary objects of instruction. Therefore, the course learning outcomes are articulated in terms of lexically specific constructions students will master by the end of the course, unit or an individual lesson, and will be able to produce both in interpersonal and presentational modes, with high degree of automaticity.

Studies conducted within the constructionist perspective (Tomasello 2009; Lieven and Tomasello, 2008; Li, Piewen; Eskildsen, and Cadierno, 2014; Ellis and Cadierno, 2009), show that acquisition of constructions is usage-based: linguistic system develops on the basis of experience with language and emerges as a result of numerous usage events -- instances of the language user's understanding and producing the language. Gradually, through repetition of similar instances of use, more abstract general representations, such as phonemes, morphemes, and syntactic patterns, begin to be formed. Thus, knowledge of language *arises* out of *language use* rather than is generated by the rules. Usage-based view rejects the traditional view, in accordance to which language is a set of rules with words plugging into them (Tyler, 2012) Although rules are convenient tools to *describe* the language, they do not *generate* sentences or can act as guidelines for creation of new utterances: they only describe something *after the fact*. Instead, linguistic representations exist in activation recurrent patterns of mental activity or cognitive routines. Following these important premises, the UBI instructional system foregoes the "rules" and has students learn L2 constructions from concrete exemplars of usage (Ellis and Cadierno, 2009). The expectation is that once a collection of like examples is in long-term memory, a more abstract schema develops and *grammar* arises out of analogical generalizations over stored exemplars of constructions. Special concern for long-term memorization and retention is one of the main characteristics of the UBI approach. Multiple iterations through both the meaningful input and output activities and relentless follow-up practice in using the already learned constructions in a variety of communicative situations during which students have to retrieve it from memory are all indispensable features of the UBI. In the same vein, the UBI instructional system emphasizes the special role of continuous review: for the new material to be transferred into the long-term memory, it is continually reviewed throughout the course.

Another important feature of Usage-Based view of language is that it does not see knowledge of language as being uniquely different from other types of knowledge. Language learning relies on a single set of cognitive processes that are involved in other types of knowledge and learning besides language. Cognitive processes involved in language learning include categorization, cross-modal association, neuro-motor automation, entrenchment and chunking, inference schematization, automation, and analogical mechanisms that we use every day to produce and decode language (Bybee, 2002; Bybee, 2013). A special role, in Usage-Based view of language acquisition, is attributed to associative learning. Learning a language, according to Ellis, is a "the gradual strengthening of associations between co-occurring elements of the language" (Ellis, 2002, p. 173). The UBI instructional system largely relies on associative learning, a powerful learning mechanism and, therefore, uses such tools as frequent, repeated exposure and use, immediate feedback, practice, and reinforcement throughout the instructional sequence, with frequency playing the most crucial role in the process. When a new constructions is introduced, students are subject to multiple exposure of the target construction. Such constant purposeful and carefully engineered repetition facilitates the process of entrenchment of constructions in the students' mind.

Another concept that figures prominently in Usage-Based model of language is entrenchment defined by Landgacker as routinization and pertains to how thoroughly the structure is mastered and "the ease of its subsequent activation" (Langacker, 1991, p. 45). In the UBI, it translates into the requirement that every construction is mastered by the students until students demonstrate fluency in its use, i.e. ease of use and natural rate of effortless production. Fluent performance is very reinforcing and students are more willing to continue in the educational enterprise (Anderson 2000, 6) in our case desire to continue foreign language study.

Underlying entrenchment is a chunking process, which results in establishing gestalt-like chunks of language processed as a holistic units. The UBI employs the concept of chunking prior to



the instruction: longer constructions are chunked or segmented into smaller digestible, bite-size pre-fabricated constructions that students will acquire and will be able to use as elements in other constructions

Introductory and intermediate language courses at Lewis University are being offered in both face-to-face and online formats. Both follow UBI model in teaching listening and speaking proficiency, with reading and writing skills supporting and supplementing them. These online courses are asynchronous, with VoiceThread as major learning/teaching venue, supplemented by various additional activities to engage and access students. There are no required times for students to be logged in, however, there are three deadlines each week for assignment submission. Typical weekly and monthly assignments include commenting on VoiceThread, Discussion Boards, Cultural Journals, movie reports/paper, individual speaking project for presentational speaking (using Voice Thread, Adobe Spark Video and annotated Powerpoint), and pair and small group work for interpersonal speaking (using online conferencing app such as *Collaborate*) Each Voice Thread online lesson consists of slides created following different stages of UBI outlined above. Adaptations from traditional courses are made for the course to better sync with an online environment. Main considerations are how to implement and deploy essential input and output activities as envisioned by UBI approach to maximize student learning experience online.

The UBI instructional sequence comprises

1. Focused Input which serves as a trigger for the development of initial meaning-form associations
2. Forced Choice output – during which students begin to produce target constructions while they are still in their phonological memory
3. Scaffolded Output during which previously learned sentence chunks come together in meaningful production, in a personalized context, based on such scaffolds as pictures, questions with modeled responses, key words and phrases, clues and prompts, both in L1 and L2.
4. Guided Practice which includes role plays, information gap activities, guided presentations, guided interviews, and other practice activities conducted both in reading and writing formats
5. Recycling -- carefully designed communicative activities that allow the student to use the language learned in a variety of new contexts making learning permanent.

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