Forget What You Think You Know – The Real Story about What Works in Languages Classrooms

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Abstract

After teaching Italian in adult and university contexts with a communicative and explicit-grammar teaching focus for nearly 25 years, I was becoming increasingly perplexed as to why my students continued to make mistakes and not learn the correct forms of basic parts of speech (e.g. definite articles). This pedagogical crisis occurred around the same time that I heard Bill VanPatten speak about the failed promises of instructed second language acquisition (SLA) [9]. In a nutshell, he claimed that much of what occurs in typical languages classrooms has next to no impact on language acquisition – this resonated strongly with me and I decided to return to SLA research to understand more [10]. What I discovered has led to a complete overhaul of my teaching approach influenced heavily by Krashen's claims that approaches based on comprehensible input are superior to all others [2]. In this paper, I will present the compelling case for comprehensible input and describe how I have implemented this in the Italian Studies program at the University of Melbourne through the use of story-listening [7]. I will also discuss student responses to the approach and provide you with a range of suggestions on how to implement this in your own contexts.

Keywords: *Teaching and learning; Comprehensible input; Italian language and culture*

1. Back to basics

As a languages teacher, have you ever found yourself wondering why your students don't seem to be progressing? Or why they continue to make the same mistakes over and over again no matter what you do? Have you found yourself constantly interrogating your teaching practice to see where you are going wrong? After teaching Italian for many years, this is exactly the predicament I found myself in – I'm calling it my pedagogical crisis. It is important to understand that I am a university languages teacher with a long history of interest in teaching and learning. I have constantly updated and upgraded my teaching programs and I take an innovative approach. I also hold qualifications in education. Finally, I have won a number of awards based on my teaching. I'm telling you this, not to boast, but to illustrate that even for someone with deep and enduring interest in pedagogy, I nevertheless found myself in the position to be questioning everything that I was doing. As often happens, it was at this moment of uncertainty and frustration that a serendipitous series of events occurred. First, I happened to come across online a keynote speech by Bill VanPatten given at the British Association of Applied Linguistics conference in 2018 [9]. VanPatten essentially challenges what is generally accepted about instructed second language acquisition in this keynote address, basically saying that most of what goes on in our classrooms under the orthodoxy of the communicative method has no real bearing on language acquisition. This prompted a return to research on second language acquisition, notably through the volume co-authored by VanPatten [10] which I would strongly recommend to all languages teachers. Second, I rediscovered the work of Stephen Krashen (http://www.sdkrashen.com/articles.php?cat=6) whose hypotheses for language acquisition now form the basis of my teaching. Of note is the emphasis on comprehensible input as the key ingredient for language learning – something, by the way, required regardless of what you believe about language acquisition, indeed "all current mainstream theories […] accept input as the data for language acquisition" [10, p. 49]. This led me to the work of Beniko Mason [7] who has formulated an input-rich approach to language teaching called story-listening. After briefly summarising the positions of VanPatten, Krashen and Mason, I will detail how I have reconfigured my approach to teaching Italian.

2. Getting the real story

In a recent paper on instructed second language acquisition, Bill VanPatten [8] states that "instruction needs to be first informed by what we know about second language acquisition". He goes on to say

that "it is not clear to me at all that this is so" [p. 56], that is, often what occurs in the languages classroom has no relation with what we know about language acquisition. In their book on second language acquisition, VanPatten, Smith and Benati [10] paint an interesting picture of the state of languages teaching. They particularly note that "it is not clear that instruction on formal features of the language speeds up acquisition" [p. 143] and that "teaching learners languages explicitly to help them along – has not borne the fruit of its efforts. It's not clear that instruction really does anything" [p. 52]. If this is indeed the case, and my direct experience bears witness to these claims, then what should we be doing instead?

First, it would seem that it is important to bridge the gap between work on second language acquisition and our teaching practices. The renowned scholar, Stephen Krashen, first put forward a comprehensive agenda for languages acquisition in the 1980s [3]. Over the last 40+ years he has continued to explore language acquisition and confirm that his original hypotheses were supported by research. The comprehension hypothesis, the latest development of his original input hypothesis, is entirely compelling and elegantly explains what occurs for learners: "[t]he Comprehension Hypothesis claims that language acquisition does not happen when we learn and practice grammar rules. Language acquisition only happens when we understand messages…even after substantial grammar study, even very motivated students show only modest gains in accuracy" [2] VanPatten, Smith and Benati [10] reinforce this position when they state "[w]hat this means for teaching is that teachers (and learners!) can relax: Given access to input, interaction with that input, and time, learners will acquire an L2" [p. 196]. Mason and Krashen further highlight the situation: "[w]e have concluded that language acquisition happens in only one way: When we understand what we hear and what we read. Traditional language teaching is based on the assumption that we first need to LEARN grammar and vocabulary by study, practice speaking and writing, and get our errors corrected. In our view, this has never worked! There are no cases of people mastering languages through conscious learning alone" [7]. What this research tells us it that we need to offer students language that they can comprehend as the prime means of promoting learning. VanPatten, Smith and Benati [10] describe this as communicatively embedded input.

After carefully reviewing the literature on language acquisition, the second step is to adopt an approach which maximises students' exposure to comprehensible input. How can we do this? My strong suggestion is to use story-listening in class, "originally used for English as a foreign language in Japan and now in use in several places through the world" [7]. Essentially, the teacher spends their valuable (and often limited) time telling the class stories using comprehension-aiding supplementation, which "does not consist of pre-teaching vocabulary but attempts to make new items more comprehensible by including drawings, gestures, explanations, and occasional brief translations" [7]. There are two vital aspects to story-listening that can cause some consternation given the long-standing orthodoxies of languages teaching: firsly, there is no need to supplement the story-listening activities with auxiliary grammar explanations, vocabulary review, or any of the typical activities that we normally find recommended in textbooks. Indeed, Mason and Krashen emphasise this point: "[i]n some classes, teachers provide additional skill-building exercises assuming it will help students "solidify" their knowledge of the new words. The time, however, appears to be better spent listening to more stories… In terms of total time spent, story listening is more efficient: Students gain more words per minutes from stories than from stories followed by exercises… And needless to say, listening to stories is far more interesting than doing exercises" [7]. Creating a class environment which is enjoyable and stimulating and minimises second language anxiety [1] goes a long way towards creating success in languages learning. Secondly, the aim of story-listening is to "help students develop a pleasure reading habit. There is consistent evidence that self-selected pleasure reading is by far the best way to acquire vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and writing style… this approach results in spectacular growth in language" [7]. All of this should be good news for languages educators, but, unfortunately, there remains much confusion around what actually works in the classroom – for a discussion of why this might be the case see [4]. In the next section, I describe how I have modified my teaching programs to provide an input-rich environment for learning.

3. Changing the narrative

After more that two decades teaching Italian using the prevailing explicit-grammar-communicative approach, I have completely abandoned any teaching of grammar, replacing this with story-listening classes and a comprehensive agenda for promoting self-selected reading. I am fortunate in that I teach in a university setting and have a high degree of freedom to design curriculum according to my needs and desires. As I hope is clear, however, my new curricula are underpinned by reference to published research, which, crucially, is shared with my students. One of the key ingredients to gaining

students' engagement is to let them understand why you are doing what you are doing – in my experience, this has had a huge positive impact as students start to interrogate how and what they are learning. To briefly encapsulate my pedagogical innovations:

1. Story-listening – students have weekly story-listening classes where stories are told with comprension-assisting supplementation after which they complete an activity which evaluates their understanding. These activities focus on global understanding rather than the dull, run-of-the-mill comprehension questions and can include things like drawing the story, retelling the story through creating a short play, a song, a comic strip, reconstructing the story from jumbled sentences, translating or rewriting the story in a different language, adding a new ending to the story, etc.
2. Reading – students are required to complete a weekly quota of reading which they record in an assessed reading log
3. Reflection – a requirement that is placed on the students is to reflect on the impact of story-listening and reading on their learning and to consider how this is similar or different from they past experiences of instructed second language acquisition

3.2 Student responses

My experience of recalibrating curriculum using an input-rich approach has been overwhelmingly positive. Students have taken to this approach wholeheartedly and consistently described two effects: an increased understanding of how the language works as a whole, rather than as isolated bits that you use to complete grammar exercises and a surprising increase in competence and confidence. Most notably, students describe the complete reduction of negative feelings often associated with the stress of the language classroom [1]. Most encouraging for me has been students' sheer joy in engaging with global comprehension activities during story-listening classes.

4. Concluding remarks

It is difficult to fully capture the magnitude of the impact the shift to comprehension-rich pedagogy has had on my teaching practice in this short paper but I hope this will serve as an invitation to you to take a dive into some of the work that I've cited and to reconsider what you are doing. To finish with Stephen Krashen's words: "I can share two mystical, amazing facts about language acquisition. First, language acquisition is effortless. It involves no energy, no work. All an acquirer has to do is understand messages. Second, language acquisition in involuntary. Given comprehensible input, and a lack of affective barriers, language acquisition will take place. The acquirer has no choice. In a theoretical sense, language teaching is easy: All we have to do is give students comprehensible message that they will pay attention to, and they will pay attention to them if the messages are interesting" [3].

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