WHAT'S THE POINT OF LANGUAGE STUDY?

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In a classroom, somewhere in the world, at this very moment, a teacher is drilling students. Perhaps he or she is getting them to repeat a sentence which uses the present continuous. They might be doing this in chorus or individually. Or the teacher might be giving students cues (like 'running' or 'newspaper') to get individual students to say sentences like 'He's running', 'she's reading a newspaper'. Ever since the advent of the Direct approach, but especially since behaviourist psychology made its way into teaching procedures, such controlled practice has been a common feature in much teaching.

Yet such controlled practice - indeed many traditional forms of language study which teachers take for granted - has always had its enemies. Dave Willis, for example, calls the idea that controlled practice leads to mastery of grammar a 'fallacy' (Willis D 1996:48) and others have been quick to make the same point. They show how even after students practise a language point for hours they still don't always get it right.

How strong is this 'anti-study' case? And how much should we perceive it as applying to all forms of concentrated attention to details of language?

The anti-study case

In his 1972 the political educationist Ivan Illich questioned the whole purpose of formal education. We may think, he suggested, that we can teach knowledge and then measure it with tests and grades. But all this is a delusion.

In fact, learning is the human activity which least needs manipulation by others. Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting. (Illich 1972:00)

First language/mother tongue learning provides a perfect example of what he is talking about, of course. All children succeed at it to a greater or lesser extent, and though parents and other close adults may help to 'teach' the language in an informal way (for example through repetition 'play' or made-up dialogues where, in the early stages, the parent will often take the baby's part when the baby can not actually speak the words), still this process is unconscious, and forms part of the young child's overall development. What the young child does get, of course, is an enormous amount of exposure to language which he or she more or less understands the meaning of. And at the end of this process, the language, miraculously, is there. No grammar rules, no obvious, specific teaching techniques, no classroom attendance. Just exposure, a clear motivation to communicate - for both physical and emotional reasons - and an opportunity to use what is being learned or acquired.

Perhaps, then, all that anybody needs to learn a new language are those three characteristics: exposure, motivation and opportunities for use. This was certainly the view of Dick Allwright and his colleagues who had the task of improving the English language skills of students who wished to study on postgraduate courses at the University of Essex in England more than twenty years ago.

The teachers at Essex reasoned that the ways they had been teaching - such as studying grammar, explaining vocabulary, or teaching paragraph organization - did not seem to have much effect and anyway, they did not 'feel right'. How would it be, they wondered, if they abandoned all that and instead devoted all their efforts into getting students to communicate with the language, interact with it, be exposed to it. After all, this would satisfy the three criteria we have just detailed. The hypothesis they were working on was, in Allwright's words, that:

....If the language teacher's management activities are directed exclusively at involving the learners in solving communication problems in the target language, then language learning will take care of itself.... (Allwright 1979:00).

In accordance with this belief, students were given tasks to do which would involve them in talking to English people, reading English texts, or searching for books in the library, for example: real tasks for

which the teachers gave no language training, advice or, crucially, correction. At the same time students were involved in communication games (which are commonplace now, but which were innovatory at the time) where the only objective was to complete the communication task using all and/ or any language at their disposal: for example a student had to draw the same picture as their partner without looking at the partner's picture, or they had to arrange objects in the same order as their partner without looking at their partner's objects - both tasks relying on verbal communication alone. The results, although not scientifically assessed, were apparently favourable. Everyone enjoyed the process far more (especially the teachers) and the students' progress appeared to have been more impressive than in previous years.

The American applied linguist Stephen Krashen, writing a short time later, appeared to be making similar suggestions about language learning too, though by dividing language 'learning' into *Acquisition* and *Learning* he was being far more specific (Krashen 1984). Language we acquire, he claimed, is language we can easily use in spontaneous conversation since we tend not to check (*monitor*) whether or not it is correct. It's just there, much as a child's is. But this language only gets to the acquired 'store' if the acquisition has been subconscious, fed into our brains in such a way that we may understand its meaning even if we are not, at that stage, completely familiar with the language we are hearing or seeing. Language that is learnt, on the other hand, doesn't get into that acquired store. This language which has been taught as grammar, which has been the object of study, is not available in the same way for spontaneous communication: indeed, it may be that its only use is to help us to monitor our spontaneous communication and, of course, the more we monitor what we are saying, the less spontaneous we become!

Krashen saw successful

students' acquisition of language as being bound up with the nature of the language input they received. It had to be comprehensible (that is slightly above the student's own productive language level, but where the meaning was understood), and the students had to be exposed to it in a relaxed setting. This *Roughly-tuned input* is in stark contrast to the *finely-tuned input* of much language instruction, where specific language has been chosen for conscious learning. Roughly-tuned input aides acquisition, Krashen argued, but finely-tuned input together with conscious learning does not. More recently he has argued forcefully for reading as the only way to become good at reading, to develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and decent spelling. [1]

A further attack on traditional forms of language teaching, - especially the use of repetition and controlled practice - has centred around studies which have demonstrated that it is impossible to show a direct connection between controlled repetition, for example, and the learning and/or acquisition of any particular grammatical item. Indeed, some people have gone even further purporting to show that most people tend to learn grammar, especially, in more or less the same order, irrespective of the input they are exposed to.

Doubts about 'anti-study'

As I suggested at the beginning of this article, however, language teaching has not changed quite as dramatically as some of the commentators might have expected, given the attacks on it which we have been looking at. It is true that many teachers now include various communicative tasks as part of their teaching routine. It is certainly the case that reading and listening (as exposure) are far more important than they were twenty years ago. Yet at the same time, certain forms of study (even the drilling we mentioned above) just go on and on!

This is partly due to the theories themselves, whose claims are somewhat weakened when exposed to close scrutiny. For example, highly-motivated adult students who are learning in a target-language community might benefit enormously from nothing more than exposure, motivation and use, especially if, like Allwright's subjects, they already had already reached intermediate levels of English. It does not follow however, that the same kind of approach would be appropriate for students at different levels studying in different situations in other parts of the world.

And what of acquisition and learning? When someone produces language, how can you tell if this language is 'learnt' or a 'acquired'? The speaker will almost certainly be unable to provide you with the answer, and there are no ways, so far, of finding this out (see Gregg 1984, and Ellis 1983, for examples of critical looks at Krashen's claims). Secondly, many commentators have questioned the suggestion that learnt language can never pass to the acquired store. This seems observably false. Both roughly-tuned and finely-tuned input end up becoming acquired language at some point. However, no one has suggested that Krashen is wrong about the beneficial qualities of comprehensible input in a relaxed setting or that reading the right kinds of text greatly enhance language acquisition and learning.

And what of Willis' criticism of controlled practice, by which he appears to mean both individual and choral repetition? It may not fulfil the role originally ascribed to it (the mastery of the grammar) but at certain levels it may well have other pay-offs in terms of encouraging early motor skills and, in providing at the very least the illusion of progress to aid the students' motivation. It may help establish stress patterns and help students to memorise certain fixed lexical phrases.

Much of the problem in discussing acquisition and learning in trying to discover whether

'language learning will take care of itself' occurs when the discussion is divorced from the level and age of the students and the places in which the learning is taking place. A lot depends on when and where you do it, in other words. Of course it is true that all children 'acquire'; as the American linguist Steven Pinker has pointed out, up to the age of about six children acquire languages with great ease. But this ease of acquisition is steadily compromised until just after puberty and is rare thereafter. So it's different for post-pubescent adults, and those who succeed at grammar (and are thus able to express many meanings unambiguously) ...often depend on the conscious exercise of their considerable intellects unlike children to whom language acquisition just happens. (Pinker 1995:291). For such people, especially when they are learning in classrooms away from target-language communities, focused language study is not only useful, it is almost certainly desirable, and most adults want it anyway. Just involving students in communicative tasks may thus be unsatisfactory, provoking, in the words of one school inspector in the United Kingdom an over emphasis on performance at the expense of production. (Wickstead 1998:3)

What is language study?

Language 'study' is not the same as controlled practice, however, though, controlled practice is a kind of language study. Drilling will probably be helpful for certain things (stress patterns for example) but almost certainly loses its effectiveness if overdone and if applied indiscriminately to all kinds of language at all levels. Then it may well become counter-productive or even, what is worse, a 'waste of time'. And that, surely, is the point. Students expect teachers to help them 'study' language, but the *way* they do this will depend on who the students are, what level they are at and, crucially, what is to be studied. Students might be focusing on the difference between two sounds, for example, or on ways of inviting

someone; they might be considering how paragraphs are constructed, what intonation means or how a text in a specific genre is organised for maximum effect. The verb to study means to focus on something to understand it better, so whether we are explaining the present simple to our students or getting them to examine a transcript of informal spoken English (see Carter & McCarthy 1997), for example, this is what we are doing. Study can mean the teacher helping students to 'notice' features of language (see Schmidt 1990), or might be the teacher showing them how to produce correctly stressed words.

Study is one element in the Engage-Study-Activate trilogy (see Harmer 1998), though where it comes in a lesson sequence depends on what the teacher and the students are trying to achieve. Perhaps 'study' comes at the end of a 'task cycle' (see Willis J 1996), or perhaps it starts a dialogue-building session after students have been engaged. But what is clear is that while we may be happy to espouse the centrality of 'exposure, motivation and use' in language learning, study, in all its many and varied forms, has its rightful place in the foreign language classroom.

Three examples of 'study' activities

In the first example, students rearrange the words 'bites dispute dog fence neighbour' into a headline before reading a humorous newspaper article from which they might then 'write a letter to the newspaper', role play an interview with the people in the story, discuss the issues raised or write their own newspaper article. Only later, if and when it is necessary, will the teacher draw their attention to language points such as headline writing, newspaper-article composition etc. Study - in this case drawing attention to - comes after the 'fun' of the material and the activity.

In the second example, students use dictionaries or a language corpus, for example to find out how we collocate verbs like wave, shake

clench etc; with different parts of the body (wave your arm, shake your head, clench your fist etc). This study leads on to getting them to describe how people, physically, say goodbye, say hello, express indifference, express anger etc.

In the third example, students discuss their predictions about a reading text, before reading it and enjoying it in a number of ways. They then 'study' the text to find a particular language feature (is it written in a British or an American variety of English, do you think?), then study it again for another language feature (how is 'could' used in the text), and perhaps again for vocabulary use etc., before going on to activate their language on the basis of what they have read.

So this study has, in all three instances, been incorporated into a longer teaching sequence (responding to a newspaper article, discussing how we use our bodies to give signals, and working with a longer reading text). In each case the 'study' is of a slightly different type, and it occurs in different parts of the learning cycle.

Notes

1   This is a quote from a 1993 article reported in Day and Bamford (199:38)

Conclusion

To deny students the opportunity to study language in class is not only cruel, but also counter-intuitive in all sorts of ways. However, the point that teachers have to remember is that study can be of many different kinds, and that it can occur at many different points of the learning cycle. The trick is to tailor the type of study to the students in our classrooms, the levels they have reached, the goals they have and, crucially, the type of language being studied.

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