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Story-Based Foreign Language Learning

By José A. Villavicencio

Introduction

Foreign language education has transitioned from a grammar-based approach, with an emphasis on form, to a communication-based approach, with an emphasis on meaning (Brown, & Vidal, 2001). Although both approaches are philosophically juxtaposed, the knowledge of grammar is required to accurately communicate in the target language. This review will clarify the distinctions between programs based on meaning and form, and then show that story-based learning improves the teaching of grammar as well as the learning of the target language. Story-based learning bridges meaning and form instruction by contextualizing both. This approach, known as "Language Arts" in English education, has surfaced in foreign language education as story-based language learning (Adair-Hauck, Donato & Cuomo, 2000).

Meaning vs. Form

In teaching for communication, the student concentrates on the message and is assessed on the ability to be understood. However in teaching for grammatical competence, the belief is that in order to make the message clear and understandable, the student must know all the syntactical points of the language. The student is then evaluated on how well he/she knows those grammatical points before attempting to communicate.

Background

In 1996, the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project proposed that "communication" was at the center of foreign language instruction. Communication was then defined as a meaningful exchange of information, feelings and emotions, and opinions where meaning is negotiated in writing or in a conversation. Furthermore, communication was defined as one that is used to: exchange information, establish close relationships, and "communicate with self" (National Standards in Foreign Language Project, 1996). These divisions are refined as to the types of communication mode: interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational.

A teacher whose goals are to teach language for communication must provide students opportunities to practice the exchange of information; interpret and analyze readings; and reflect on the language systems being studied. By contrast, traditional language programs offered little or no opportunity to exchange or reflect about what was presented by the teacher. Students who learned from traditional approaches knew about language structure but could not communicate information, feelings and emotions, or report on reading interpretations (Lee, 2000).

The national standards stress that knowledge of morphology, phonology

and syntax is necessary for accurate communication exchanges. To meet that goal teachers must provide opportunities for interactive language learning to deepen the knowledge of the language in the learner. Grammar instruction must not be isolated language points but rather, they must be in situations that require the recall and the use of grammar for accurate communication (Krashen & Terrell 1983).

PACE as a Solution

PACE is an acronym for the process of:

- Presentation of meaningful language
- Attention to some language usage
- Co-construct an explanation of the language in question
- Extension activity that promotes the use of the language to carry-out a function or task.

PACE is a four step program that integrates formal instruction and the learning of language based on the use of stories (Adair-Hauck, Donato & Cuomo, 2000). Language learning based on the use of stories is well suited to be adapted to foreign language teaching. Stories can be told, first for meaning with the use of visuals or other techniques, followed by role plays, and finally reading and writing activities. Story-based language learning requires that the meaning of a story be completely understood before grammatical analysis and comparison of the language forms are studied. A story can be: a poem, a recipe, a conversation, a legend, or any authentic material or communication exchange. Authentic refers to its original native form. The implications for selecting a story and its form of delivery have both cognitive and pedagogical implications.

This approach to teaching the foreign language is based on the constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1978) and on theories of first language development. (Ellis, 1985). Vygotsky addresses his theories to instruction as an interactive dynamic process that is guided in the classroom by the teacher, "the expert". The development of literacy through literature skills brought to second language instruction concepts as comprehensible input, the idea of interaction with the teacher, attention to the teaching materials, skills acquisition, the continuing development of oral language, and scaffolding (Johnson & Louis, 1987).

Language instruction should be based on input that is slightly more challenging than the level of the students (Menyuk, 1971). Thus, the materials that are selected must be suitable for the students and should be chosen for instruction because they are meant to motivate and provide pleasure to them. The authentic materials should not be simplified to accommodate the lesson or to teach about the language in isolation. The last concept that should be kept in mind is that students need guidance to draw attention to specific points on the reading that they would not obtain on their own. Guidance can be provided with the use of inferences, conclusions, themes, symbolisms, and foreshadowing (Johnson & Louis, 1987).

Conclusion

The approach of using authentic “stories” to develop language proficiency takes into account that learners gain greater understanding of the target language when the materials used relate and motivate the students by involving them in the learning process and when they receive expert guidance.

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