Creating Comprehensible

By Bill VanPatten

When I was asked to write the framing message for this special section on input and output in language teaching for *The Language Educator*, I said to myself, "But what can I say that everyone doesn't already know?"

After all, understanding the roles that input and output play in second language development is the bedrock of contemporary language teaching. And then the following questions occurred to me: Is everyone clear on what language is? Is everyone clear on what communication is? To understand the important roles of input and output in language acquisition and also language teaching is to understand the nature of language and the nature of communicative ability—and how they are not the same.

So, with hopes that I will get the reader to make some new connections and think about some old topics in novel ways, I'll begin with the nature of language.

Language as Mental Representation

To begin, let's take a quiz. You probably know something is round when you see it, right? A basketball is round but a book is not. Now, take a minute and try to define "round" in a clear and coherent manner. (Don't read ahead!)

How did it go? You probably thought for a few minutes and then eked out some definition, but note that your definition (if accurate) was not something you knew; you had to reason it out from your subconscious system. That is, your knowledge of what is round is implicit. (For the curious, the technical definition of "round" is "having all surface points equidistant from the center.")

The point of this simple test is that in our heads, our mental representation of a language is like our knowledge of what round means; it is implicit knowledge that is unknown without effortful reasoning. Linguists do this effortful reasoning for a living and how they describe our mental representation would boggle the non-expert's mind.

So, our first point about any mental representation of language (first or second) is that it is implicit. It is implicit because it exists outside of awareness; that is, we know we have it, but we cannot articulate its content.

At the same time, the linguistic system is complex and abstract in that it does not

consists of rules or paradigms as traditionally found in textbooks and over-the-counter grammar guides. Let's go back to our definition of round. When you read it, you probably said, "Of course! That makes sense." But did you notice how complex and abstract the definition was? That is, what does "surface" mean? What about "point"? What is the meaning of "equidistant"? And, not to be left out, what is the "center" of something? So, embedded in the relatively short and seemingly obvious definition of round are other constructs equally abstract for which we have additional implicit knowledge. These constructs interact in a complex way to yield the meaning of round.

Mental representation of language is no different. Both first and second language learners wind up with a highly abstract and complex system we call "language" that defies simple description. Most importantly for the present discussion, the "grammar" of textbooks represents a shorthand way of talking about something that is too abstract and complex to talk about in non-technical terms.

What teachers need to understand is that the rules and paradigms in textbooks simply aren't the things that wind up in our heads. They are not "psychologically real." Once we understand that mental representation is not the same as textbook rules and paradigms, we can better understand the roles of input and output. [References are provided for those who want to know about the nature of language more specifically. See box on p. 26.]

Communicative Ability

Distinct from mental representation is communicative ability. A good working definition of communication is something like "the expression and interpretation of meaning in a

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given context." Context is defined as the setting (physical space) and the participants (including their ages, roles, genders). It should be intuitively obvious to us that context affects communication. How we interact in a classroom is different from how we interact during dinner with friends. How a doctor interacts with patients in an office is different from how that doctor interacts with a romantic partner while watching a movie at home.

In short, communication is not something static; it is highly fluid and dynamic. The kind of communication appropriate in one context might not be appropriate in another. Of particular relevance to language teachers is that the classroom is one context with fixed participants and a fixed setting. So the classroom context will affect how we express and interpret meaning as well as what kind of meaning can be in focus.

The question for language professionals is this: How do mental representation and skill develop over time? To address this question, we turn our attention to the roles of input and output.

The Roles of Input and Output

Let's return to the meaning of "round" for a moment. Do you ever remember being taught what round meant? And if you do, did you understand that definition? Most likely, you weren't taught anything about roundedness. Over time, you developed a notion of roundedness from lots of exposure to round objects. In short, your knowledge of roundedness comes from the numerous samples of roundedness you were exposed to.

Mental representation for language develops much in the same way. Learners hear and see language in a communicative context that they process for meaning. We call this type of language *input*. Input cannot be equated with the staple of much traditional language teaching: explanation about grammar, presentation of vocabulary lists, practice, fill-in-the-blanks, and so on. For mental representation to develop, learners have to hear and see language as it is used to express meaning. There are no shortcuts; representation cannot be taught in the traditional sense of teaching. Input does not guarantee acquisition, however. Nothing does. But acquisition cannot happen in the absence of input.

Communicative ability also develops in only one way: through engaging in communication. That is, people learn to communicate by engaging in acts of expressing and interpreting meaning in many varied contexts. Communicative ability cannot be "drilled." It cannot be practiced in the traditional sense of practice. Communicative ability develops because we find ourselves in communicative contexts. Thus, *output* (the expression of meaning) plays a major role in the development of communicative ability.

Implications

A major question for language teachers is what kinds of activities promote the development of mental representation and what kinds promote the development of communicative ability. Clearly, input-oriented activities help to develop mental representation. Interactive activities help to develop communicative ability. In either case, we must keep in mind our definition of communication: the expression and interpretation of meaning in a given context. Thus, whether our activities are input oriented, interactive, or some combination, the expression and interpretation of meaning within the classroom context should be the core of these activities.

Let's take a simple example: Suppose we are on a unit about the family. Most teachers are concerned with teaching and testing the words for family members. Instead, our defintion of communication drives us toward teaching and testing the content of particular families. When I work on the unit on families, I present my family tree to students. The goal of my presentation (which is clearly input oriented) is not that students learn the words for family members. My goal is for them to learn who my family members are, their ages, their relationships to me, and some interesting fact about each one. Through this expression of meaning on my part, learners are exposed to appropriate input. The focus is on content (meaning); grammar and vocabulary are incidental. That is, as I focus on meaning (information about my family), vocabulary and grammar related to family are "dragged along" with the presentation. Importantly, during such presentations, teachers can't talk at students; they must involve them in the presentation. Here's an example of what this might look like. I will present it in English but it could apply to any language.

This is my family. [pointing to the immediate family tree] In my family, there are five people. [points to the four members] My father's name is Bill. [points] My mother's name is Juanita. [points] My stepfather's name is Joe. [points] And my sister's name is Gloria. [points] [steps away from the drawing] Okay, what's my sister's name? [students shout out] What's my mother's name? [students shout out] Who's my stepfather, Joe or Bill? [students shout out] Good memory! So, my father is Bill, my mother is Juanita, and my sister is Gloria. And my stepfather is

Joe. [pointing each time] Now, my father is 82 years old. [points to age] My mother is 81 years old. [points] And my sister is 60 years old. [points] Let's test your memory. Who is 82? My father or my mother? [students shout out] And what's my sister's age? [students shout out] Wow. You really do have good memories. Okay, let's look at my grandparents. [reveals more of the family tree] These are my paternal grandparents. [points] Dick is my grandfather. [points] Birgit is my grandmother. [points] Okay, now we're really going to test your memory. Who is Bill? My father or my grandfather? [students shout out] Okay, and who is my grandmother? [students shout out]. Great! So far we have: Gloria, my sister; Bill, my father; Juanita, my mother; Dick, my paternal grandfather; and Brigit, my maternal grandmother. Now let's look at my maternal grandparents. [reveals more of the family tree]

When I test these students, I don't test for family vocabulary. Instead, I use family vocabulary to test about the content of my family. This could involve true/false, matching, and so on. For example, at the end of this presentation, I might have Column A with names and Column B with relationships and ask students to match names to their relationships to me. I would continue with other presentations in which families different from mine are presented so that diversity of family makeup is part of the content.

Now what might an interactive activity look like in which learners engage in creating output (as well as some input) for the purpose of communication? Such an activity might have a setup such as the following:

Purpose: To find out what typical families in this class look like

Step 1. You will interview a classmate to find out the following information about that classmate's immediate family. Think about what questions you might ask and how you would go about getting the information. You will be interviewed later by someone else, so think about how you would answer.

Include:
- parents and ages
- siblings and ages
- family pets, if any
- grandparents, maternal and paternal

Step 2. Interview your classmate and jot down all the information that you obtain. You will need this later to present to the class.

Step 3. Follow your teacher's questions and instructions.

[During Step 3, the instructor calls on people to present information about someone's family. The instructor tallies information on the board as the discussion proceeds so that eventually the class can determine: typically family size (number of parents, number of siblings, etc.); number of divorced families/blended families; and so on. The teacher then puts up census information about typical families in the United States. Is the census representative of the class?]

What is important to see in the above activity is that its purpose is not to practice vocabulary related to the family. Instead, the purpose is to get information to later build a class profile. Thus, everything students have learned is subservient to a communicative goal—and learners are engaged in the expression and interpretation of meaning in the classroom context. When learners speak, they speak to engage in communication; they don't speak to practice something. Currently, too much of language pedagogy has learners engaged in output to practice something; this "communication" is subservient to learning vocabulary and grammar. The role of output and interaction in communication and language acquisition suggests that this is backwards.

Challenges

I have hinted at the major challenge that faces teachers when reading about input and output and their roles in second language development. That challenge is resisting the temptation to think that input and output are "techniques" to teach "the same old thing." What tends to happen is that teachers generally stick to the historically motivated scope and sequence of vocabulary and grammar for language courses and look for novel ways to teach those things. That is, teachers look for input and output activities for teaching *ser* versus *estar* in Spanish, or the choice of *avoir* and *etre* with the *passé composé* in French or the case system in Russian. This it not at all what is implied in the roles of input and output in language acquisition.

For at least three decades, research on language acquisition has been pointing to a fundamental reconsideration of teaching, materials, and curricular goals. Understanding the roles of input and output in acquisition means that teachers and administrators may have to make some profound changes in how they approach the classroom if proficiency as communicative ability is the goal of the student's experience. To drive the point home, without the expression and interpretation of meaning at the core of what we do, input and output become mere techniques. But input and output are not techniques; they are the very foundations of language acquisition and communication.

Suggested References

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