In a World of Theory, Chaos Reigns:
Theory to Practice and Practice to Theory

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Chaos theory states that complex and unpredictable results can and will occur in systems that are sensitive to their initial conditions. The Butterfly Effect, an example of Chaos Theory in practice, states that the flutter of a butterfly's wings in China could possibly affect weather patterns in New York City, thousands of miles away. In other words, a very small occurrence can produce unpredictable and sometimes drastic results by triggering a series of increasingly significant events. We can apply this concept to foreign language education (FLE).

In the FLE domain, on the surface, we may not discern a connection between practitioners, who concentrate on practical applications, and theorists, who focus primarily on the language acquisition process. In fact, we often talk about the conflictive nature of the relationship between the two groups. However, an underlying association binds them together. Specifically, much good practice is based on good theory, which in turn, is based on the observation of good practice, both communicative and pedagogical. In this paper, we examine the reciprocal relationship of some common practices associated with teaching for proficiency and the theoretical underpinnings that have influenced them.

Teaching For Proficiency

Spearheaded by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), which has long focused on what students can do with the language and how well they do it rather than just what they know about it, our field has experienced a shift in focus from teaching grammar and vocabulary to teaching for communicative proficiency. In response to the call for proficiency, we language teachers have changed our goals from teaching students *about* the language to teaching them to *use* it. We focus on natural language use which takes place in the context of the larger world and which is governed by phonological, grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse rules (Canale and Swain, 1980). We create communicative activities that foster the internalization of grammatical forms and concepts. We strive to generate real and/or simulated opportunities for our students to exchange meaningful information about real-life events. We now teach students not only *what* to say but also *to whom* and *when*. Finally, we teach them strategies to achieve the established communicative goals. Our methodological transformations have resulted, at least in part, from theoretical advances regarding both language and language learning that have led us to question what and how we teach. We briefly discuss some of those changes in the sections that follow.

What We Teach

Theories derived from research in a variety of related fields have impacted what is taught in the foreign language classroom. For example, anthropological views of language, which are reflected in The National Standards (1996), focus on the language/culture connection. This concept of language is largely inspired by the work of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956), who believed that the world-view of a culture is shaped by its language system and, in return, shapes its language system. (A well-known example is the relatively large number of words for "snow" in the Inuit, or Eskimo, language family.) From this theoretical viewpoint, it follows that language can only be understood (learned) within the concrete situations and cultural contexts in which it occurs. Clearly, these ideas about language are reflected in proficiency-oriented teaching practices. A classic example is our teaching students about the *tu/vous* (familiar/formal) distinction in French and all of the cultural knowledge needed to use these forms of address appropriately.

Similarly, theories derived from research on interlanguage pragmatics have also helped define what we teach. Interlanguage pragmatics is an area of second language acquisition (SLA) which studies how non-native speakers comprehend and produce speech acts in the target language and how their pragmatic competence develops over time. For example, how does a non-native speaker of English come to understand that, "What

are you doing tonight?" is less a request for information than it is (likely) an invitation? One important theoretical contribution with respect to interlanguage pragmatics concerns planned intervention. That is, theorists believe it essential that we specifically address pragmatic aspects of language with our students in order to facilitate their ability to fully interact with native speakers in culturally appropriate ways (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1996; Schmidt, 1993). In light of these considerations, we no longer organize our syllabi around grammar points, but rather around language functions (speech acts) such as questions, apologies, compliments, reports, direction giving, and requests. Likewise, many of our textbooks are organized around these functions rather than grammatical structures, shifting the focus of language learning from knowing about the language to using the language for communicative purposes.

In addition to the influences of anthropology and pragmatics on classroom practice, suggestions made by researchers such as Rebecca Oxford, who views the language learning process in cognitive terms, have had an impact on foreign language instruction. Cognitivists believe we should teach students not only the language, but also *how to learn* the language. They suggest learners use both cognitive strategies (strategies for learning information) and metacognitive strategies (strategies for learning how to learn the information). By teaching them to use these techniques, we enable them to acquire both the language and the necessary skills for acquiring language. For example, in the classroom, we provide our students "pre-listening" or "pre-reading" exercises to help prepare them for a task at hand; visual organizers, such as skeleton outlines for paragraphs or essays, are usually found among our stock of handouts. Cook (1993) provides a list of strategies commonly used by successful foreign language learners.

Cognitive strategies
- Repetition
- Resourcing (e.g., dictionaries)
- Translation-note-taking
- Deduction
- Contextualization of words or phrases in meaningful sequences
- Transfer of existing knowledge
- Inferencing
- Asking for clarification

Metacognitive strategies
- Directed attention
- Selective attention
- Self-monitoring
- Self-evaluation
- Self-reinforcement

We language teachers train our students to use these strategies to meet their individual learning needs as they construct knowledge of the language and of language learning. Unmistakably, the contributions of researchers in this domain have affected what we teach. While these ideas

about language have influenced what we teach, theoretical input concerning language learning has also influenced *how* we teach.

How We Teach
Knowledge gleaned from SLA research has radically transformed how we teach language. In this section we examine three categories of attributes commonly associated with proficiency-oriented teaching (learning environment, input, and student output) within the context of some of the theory that inspired them.

Learning Environment
Theoretical knowledge about how we learn and, more specifically, how we learn language has influenced our classroom environment. One such theoretical approach, constructivism, based on the works of Piaget (1972) and Vygotsky (1978), considers learning an active, creative, and socially interactive process. Constructivists believe learning occurs when individuals try to make sense of new information by relating it to their prior knowledge, their past experiences with the world. Tenets of constructivism include:
- Learning occurs through interacting with others.
- Learning is an active process. Learners use sensory input to construct meaning.
- Although learning is a personal and unique experience, it takes place within a larger context. We learn in relationship to existing knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes.

SLA researchers such as Swain (1985) also call for sufficient opportunities to use the language, suggesting that learners need sufficient practice producing the language in order to acquire it.

One of the chief transformations reflecting the aforementioned theories and ushered in by the proficiency movement is a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction. Proficiency-oriented teachers employ instructional strategies that allow for and encourage ample student practice and interaction in the target language. Activities commonly found in proficiency-oriented classrooms include cooperative learning tasks, role plays, use of computer software, and other ventures that afford students a more central part in the learning process. A common phrase associated with this student-centered approach to teaching is that it transforms the teacher's role from being the *sage on the stage* to the *guide on the side*. To the uninitiated, today's student-centered classrooms may even appear "chaotic." However since the learning process, or the construction of meaning, requires interaction with others, it will inevitably result in some "noise."

Although many theorists contend that interaction in the target language is an essential component of the learning process, for some learners, this expectation produces high levels of anxiety. Proficiency-oriented teachers, therefore, strive to make the classroom a "safe place" where students feel free to take risks. Much of the impetus for this type of environment came from Stephen Krashen's (1987) affective filter hypothesis, which postulates that second language

learners who experience low motivation, low self-esteem, and anxiety likely experience a high *affective filter* and form a "mental block" which prevents them from using comprehensible input for language acquisition. We attempt to lower the affective filter in the classroom by encouraging students to participate freely and by letting them know that it is normal to make errors. In order to reduce anxiety, we let students volunteer when they feel comfortable enough to participate, provide opportunities for small group practice, and attend to the learning styles and needs of our students. Most importantly, we attend to meaning; we respond to *what* they say, (content) not just *how* they say it (form).

Input

Another of Krashen's theories is explained in his Input Hypothesis, which maintains that comprehensible input is all a learner must be exposed to in order to learn the target language. More recent discussions call for some refining of this hypothesis; while most of us recognize that learners need to comprehend input in order to acquire the language, few concur that comprehensible input *alone* suffices. However, as a field, we generally believe students learn new aspects of language in the context of what they already know by comprehending target language use that is a bit beyond their current level (but not *too* much)—what Krashen refers to as "I" (input) + 1. In proficiency-oriented classrooms, therefore, we provide input by using the target language as the medium for daily, routine instruction, and receptive and productive target language opportunities abound. We expose our students to much realia (target language stories, songs, poems, brochures, web sites, etc.) in order to provide them ample authentic language. To help them understand the I+1 and make inferences, we use gestures, pantomime, cues, activities, and visual aids.

Student Output

The changes we have implemented in our teaching in order to provide more opportunities for student output also find their roots in SLA theory. Selinker (1972), for example, coined the term "interlanguage," which means that learners' attempts at producing the target language are governed neither by rules in their native language (L1) or the second language (L2). On the contrary, learners creatively invent an "interlanguage" that continuously changes and grows in complexity as they learn the L2. We acknowledge this process in the classroom when we recognize that errors often indicate students are internalizing new information about the language. We no longer attempt to correct every grammatical inaccuracy, since student output is crucial to the language acquisition process. Rather, we encourage them to play with the language, fully expecting their mistakes.

In addition, we recognize the contributions of theories from discourse analysts, who focus on language "beyond the sentence." They have shown us that students proceed through the language learning process by interacting with one another to negotiate meaning (Hatch, 1978). Consequently, we provide ample opportunities for unstructured interaction in addition to more controlled practice. Our students produce language as they engage in small group work without our constant supervision.

Yet another theory related to output focuses on variability in students' language production. Ellis's (1985) Variable Competence Model attempts to explain why students may seem to master a linguistic form in one context and then experience difficulty with the same form under different circumstances. Ellis's model suggests a number of factors that contribute to this variability such as individual differences, differences in the context in which the language is used, and the learner's physical or emotional conditions which can prompt slips. Essentially, depending on the context, these factors may come into play when students are using the target language and may result in inaccurate production of linguistic aspects that had seemingly already been "mastered." Sometimes learners produce the desired form, seemingly having "gotten it," and sometimes they do not. Consequently, we have learned to "recycle" the different elements of the language we want them to internalize. We recognize these natural processes with reasonable (level-appropriate) expectations regarding learner accuracy. Ellis's model accounts for variability and informs our practice regarding learner output, as do those of Hatch and Selinker.

Conclusion

Our goal in this paper was to bring to light the connection between theory and practice in foreign language classrooms. Second language acquisition theory is frequently based on research sparked by observation of students and their teachers as they engage in the language learning process. In turn, these theoretical insights have a profound effect on our methodological choices. Then, in light of the choices teachers make, researchers have access to ever-evolving dynamics that help them better understand the complexities of the SLA process. As a result, theories are revised and the ensuing pedagogical suggestions once again impact instruction. As foreign language professionals, we can and should use SLA theory to guide us as we set about our goals. We can and should seek opportunities to collaborate with researchers and to conduct our own action research in our classrooms. Both roles, that of practitioner and that of researcher/theorist are important in advancing our knowledge of the acquisition process and improving the acquisition environment for foreign language learners. Perhaps the effects will not be quite as remarkable as those described by the Butterfly Effect. However, our actions and our words can and will bring about the winds of change.

For Reflection

1. Which theories mentioned in this paper are most relevant to you in your personal teaching philosophy? Why?
2. There are many theories of SLA not mentioned in this paper. Do you recognize the influence in your teaching of any of them? Which ones?
3. Do you share the theoretical reasons for what and how you teach with your students?
4. What do you do to keep abreast of theories impacting foreign language education?

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