

## **The Case for Non-Targeted, Comprehensible Input**

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In nearly all foreign and second language classes, there is a "rule of the day" as well as vocabulary that students are expected to focus on, often referred to as "target" grammar and vocabulary. In traditional pedagogy, exercises are aimed at the conscious learning of this targeted grammar and vocabulary. They are also included in brief readings, which are generally packed with the targeted items.

Targeted grammar and vocabulary is also present in TPRS, and in "modified" Natural Approach, as manifested in the *Dos Mundos* textbooks, although the goal in these cases is the subconscious acquisition of the target items. TPRS provides longer, more interesting reading selections and discussions, but typically utilizes a grammatical syllabus.

I present here the disadvantages of the grammatical syllabus and targeted input in general, and discuss how TPRS (Ray and Seely, 2008) deals with these difficulties. I then argue that we do not need to have a grammatical syllabus, and that comprehensible input effortlessly deals with grammatical syllabus' shortcomings.

### **Problems with the grammatical syllabus**

**The natural order problem.** As is well-known, studies have shown that we acquire the grammar of a language in a predictable order, and this order cannot be broken. For an item of grammar to be acquired, the language acquirer must be ready to acquire the item. It must, in other words, be at the acquirers'  $i+1$ , where  $i$  = aspects of grammar that were most recently acquired.

We cannot simply teach along the natural order, presenting earlier acquired aspects of language first and late-acquired aspects of language later. While we have enough evidence for the natural order in a few languages to support the hypothesis that the order exists, we do not know enough to create a syllabus. So far we have only been able to specify the order of acquisition of

a handful of structures. But even if we could specify the entire order of acquisition, it would not be a good idea to base a syllabus on it. In fact, it is not a good idea to have any grammatical syllabus.

**Constraint on interest.** The goal of the language classroom is to provide input that is genuinely interesting, so interesting that students, in a sense, "forget" that it is in another language. In fact, the "forgetting hypothesis" requires that the messages be not only interesting, but compelling, with all attention focused on the message to such an extent that thoughts of anxiety do not occur.

The Forgetting Hypothesis is influenced by the concept of "flow," (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). Flow is the state people reach when they are deeply but effortlessly involved in an activity. In flow, the concerns of everyday life and even the sense of self disappear - our sense of time is altered and nothing but the activity itself seems to matter. "Forgetting" and flow occur in reading when readers are "lost in a book," when they are aware only of the story or the message in the text. It is when this happens that language acquisition occurs most effectively. Note that this position is the opposite of the "focus on form" or "focus on forms" points of view.

It is very hard to create compelling messages when the hidden agenda is the relative clause. In fact, it is hard enough to do it this when there are no constraints on what vocabulary and grammar can be used.

**The review problem.** Traditional second and foreign language methods work through what is considered to be the basic grammar of a language the first year. Once a grammar rule is presented and practiced, it may not be seen again until the second year when we review the entire grammar again, because students did not master it the first year.

**The unteachable and untaught grammar problem.** The grammar presented in class is nowhere near the complete grammar of the language. Even the most accomplished linguists concede that they have only described fragments of languages. Moreover, language textbooks do not contain all that linguists have described, and teachers rarely teach everything in the texts. Thus, a grammatically-based syllabus cannot possibly do the job of producing advanced performers in a second language.

**Denial of i+1.** The impoverished input provided by the grammatical syllabus may result in students not getting input in structures they actually are ready for. Grammatical syllabi typically place easily describable items early in the sequence and more complex ones later, but the natural order of acquisition runs on different principles. Some rules that look easy to the linguist and teacher (e.g. the third person singular in English) are acquired late, while others that look complex are typically acquired early.

**Individual variation.** There is individual variation in the rate of acquisition, because of input factors (some students may have had additional input in the language outside of class) and affective factors. Even if the rule of the day happens to be at i+1 for some students, it will not be for other members of the class.

These problems are extremely serious for traditional grammar-based classrooms. Current TPRS practice attempts to reduce these problems.

**TPRS and the constraint on interest:** TPRS teachers have been remarkably resourceful in coming up with interesting and even compelling stories despite the constraint on vocabulary and grammar, thanks to full use of personalization (Ray and Seeley, 2008).

**TPRS and the review problem:** Because of the lively discussions and interesting stories, previously presented structures and vocabulary, to at least some extent, re-appear in TPRS classes and reading materials.

**TPRS and the unteachable/untaught grammar problem and the denial of i+1 problem:** As noted above, no grammatically based method can hope to teach all the rules language users need. TPRS, however, has the advantage of including a great deal of comprehensible input, input that certainly contains more grammar than just the targeted structures. It is quite possible that teachers include some aspects of grammar in the input that are not in the curriculum. The insistence, however, on total translatability (e.g. Ray and Seeley, 2008) makes this unlikely.

**Individual variation:** TPRS contributes to the solution to this problem by making sure input is comprehensible to all students, and by using more than just the target structures and vocabulary with each discussion or story.

## **Non-Targeted Comprehensible Input**

Although TPRS probably succeeds in reducing the problems of the grammatical syllabus, there is another possibility: Non-targeted comprehensible input.

### The Net Hypothesis

An important corollary of the Comprehension Hypothesis is the "Net" Hypothesis: Given enough comprehensible input,  $i+1$ , all the vocabulary and structures the student is ready for, is automatically provided. In Krashen and Terrell (1983) this was referred to as the Net: "When someone talks to you in a language you have not yet completely acquired so that you understand what is said, the speaker "casts a net" of structure around your current level of competence, your "i". This net will include many instances of  $i+1$ , aspects of language you are ready to acquire" (p. 33).

The same, of course, goes for reading: If you understand the text, and you read enough of it, you will get  $i+1$ .

Before looking at the evidence, let us for the moment assume that the Net Hypothesis is correct and see how non-targeted comprehensible input completely solves the problems of the grammatical syllabus.

**The natural order problem:** Non-targeted comprehensible input, according to the Net Hypothesis, contains the aspects of language the acquirer is ready for. This means we do not need to know the natural order. Rather, grammatical competence will emerge in a natural order as a result of getting non-targeted comprehensible input.

**Constraint on interest:** With non-targeted comprehensible input there are no target structures and target vocabulary that must be used in creating activities and stories. Anything goes, as long as the input is comprehensible and interesting (or compelling).

The problem of comprehensible and interesting is the fundamental problem of beginning language teaching. It is easy to get input that is interesting but not comprehensible, from the real world. Unfortunately school tends to

provide input that is comprehensible, but not interesting. It is hard to get both, to say interesting things using limited language, even if one is not required to use specific vocabulary and grammar.

**Denial of  $i+1$ :** Non-targeted comprehensible input, according to the Net Hypothesis, solves this problem easily:  $i+1$  is always there, if there is enough input.

**The review problem:** Non-targeted comprehensible input provides natural review, especially if there is some topic continuity in the progression of activities and reading.

**The unteachable/untaught grammar problem:** This is no problem for non-targeted comprehensible input. "Unteachable rules" are only a problem when the goal is conscious learning. Second language acquirers have always been able to acquire rules that have not been taught and that cannot be taught.

**Individual variation:** If the input is comprehensible for all members of the class, everyone is getting what they need, even if  $i+1$  is different for every member of the class. See discussion of "picking out"  $i+1$  below.

## **The evidence**

The evidence supporting the Net Hypothesis comes originally from first language acquisition. Caretaker speech to children is typically comprehensible, but is not "finely tuned" to the child's current linguistic level. As the child develops linguistically, caretaker speech tends to get more complex, but the relationship is not exact: The caretaker does not supply precisely the next rule the child is ready for.

Evidence includes studies showing that the correlations between input complexity and the child's competence are usually positive, but are not extremely high. Cross (1977) concluded that "... the syntax of mothers, even to rapidly developing children, is not uniformly pitched just a step ahead of the child in either linguistic or psycholinguistic complexity. Some utterances are pitched at the child's level, some even below this, and others are considerably in advance of what the child themselves can say" (p. 180).

No studies of input to second language acquirers have examined input to this level of detail, but we do know that teacher talk is roughly-tuned to the level of students, not finely-tuned (Krashen, 1981). We also know that second language acquirers improve from communicating with native speakers and from reading authentic reading material (Krashen, 1981, 2004), input that is certainly not finely tuned to the acquirer's  $i+1$ .

### **Picking out $i+1$**

There is, in addition, evidence that children are able to pick out the aspects of the input that are relevant to their stage of development, that is, they can pick out what is at their  $i+1$ .

First language researchers (Gleitman, Newport and Gleitman, 1984) studied the relationship between the frequency of yes/no questions in caretaker input and the development of the verb phrase auxiliary. A relationship was suspected because in yes/no questions the verb phrase auxiliary in English is often placed at the beginning of a clause and is stressed, which makes it very prominent (e.g. Is John playing the violin? Does Mary have a kite?). They found that the frequency of yes/no questions was indeed very strongly related to verb phrase auxiliary development for the older children in their sample (23.9 to 24.8) months ( $r = .91$ ) but was not significantly related to verb phrase auxiliary development for the younger children (18.5 to 12.3) months.

The two groups received similar input; for the older children, however, this structure was at their  $i+1$ . For the younger group, it was beyond their  $i+1$ . This did not, apparently, impair their younger children's comprehension. This suggests that the best input for acquisition is input that contains maximum richness but remains comprehensible. Such data will contain, inevitably, some  $i+n$  (input beyond  $i+1$ ), as caretaker speech always does, in the form of later-acquired aspects of grammar. Including this "noise" does not impair communication, nor would deleting it make the input more comprehensible. Rich input, as long as it is comprehensible, provides the acquirer with a better sample to work with, more opportunities to hear and read structures he or she is ready to acquire.

Roger Brown summarizes this point of view succinctly. After reviewing research on how caretakers talk to children, Brown offered this advice in

answer to the question, “How can a concerned mother facilitate her child’s learning of language?”

“Believe that your child can understand more than he or she can say, and seek, above all, to communicate. To understand and be understood. To keep your minds fixed on the same target. In doing that, you will, without thinking about it, make 100 or maybe 1000 alterations in your speech and action. Do not try to practice them as such. There is no set of rules of how to talk to a child that can even approach what you unconsciously know. If you concentrate on communicating, everything else will follow” (Brown, 1977, p. 26).

The same, I am hypothesizing, holds for second language acquisition.

### **Suggestions**

The Net Hypothesis is, of course, a hypothesis. As is the case with all scientific hypotheses, it could be refuted tomorrow. I suggest here some modest ways of introducing non-targeted comprehensible input into TRPS classes, and at the same time further test whether the hypothesis is correct.

### **Readers**

A modest first step is the creation of readers that are not targeted at certain structures and vocabulary. Instead of writing stories that include just those items that have been taught or are about to be taught, writers can just try to make the texts interesting and comprehensible, based on their own experience with students at the beginning levels. This of course is easy to test with real people who are at that linguistic level – if they understand the text (and like it), then the text is appropriate; the Net Hypothesis claims that just the right aspects of language will be automatically included.

To see if the Net Hypothesis is in fact correct, we can examine the texts of comprehensible/interesting readers and determine what structures and vocabulary are in fact covered. We can also compare the achievement of classes using these texts with those using readers matched to a grammatical syllabus and vocabulary list.

## **In class**

We can also consider loosening up class discussions and in-class stories. Our focus has been making input 100% comprehensible, with students being able to understand, and translate, every word (Ray and Seeley, 2008). Some beginners, because of bad experiences in other classes, might require fully transparent input at first, but it might be more efficient, and easier, to gradually relax the transparency constraint and insist only that the input appear to be fully comprehensible. I am suggesting that it is ok, and even desirable, that the input contain a small amount of "noise," or  $i+n$ .

Note that some of the late-acquired structures have little communicative value. The third-person singular  $-s$  in English is hard to avoid in English input, yet it is acquired very late. English acquirers have no trouble understanding input containing  $-s$  because it contributes so little to meaning. "Teaching"  $-s$  to beginners is useless, because it is late-acquired, and "simplifying" the input to exclude it is hopeless.

## **An implication**

Ray and Seely (2008) emphasize the importance of translation because they feel that students must understand every word of what is said in class and what they read. As noted earlier, this may indeed be very helpful at the very beginning, but the transparency requirement should give way to the requirement that students feel that they are understanding everything.

If only the feeling of full comprehension is required, if input is allowed to contain some  $i+n$ , we are no longer restricted to translation as a means of making input comprehensible. We are free to use pictures and realia, as emphasized in Natural Approach (see also comments by Carol Gaab in Ray and Seely, p. 235), as well as other means of making input comprehensible that do not obviously provide a one-to-one mapping from form to meaning (e.g. background readings that provide a general context for a story). If, in fact, the input is truly compelling, it is likely that students will not even

notice the "noise" or bits of incomprehensible and nontransparent elements in the input.

The usual objection to the use of pictures and realia is the danger of students not getting the exact meaning of a vocabulary item. Ray and Seely, for example, point out that when we only use pictures and do not use translation a student might conclude that "caminar" means "to go" instead of "to walk." This is, however, the way vocabulary is acquired: Each time we understand a word as part of comprehensible input, we acquire part of the meaning of the word. As we encounter it more and more, we gradually build up the precise meaning of the word as well as its grammatical properties. Research in first language development suggests, in fact, that each time we encounter a word in a meaningful context we acquire about 5% of the meaning of the word (Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985). The response to the objection that students may not get the entire meaning with one exposure is to provide many exposures in different contexts, something that non-targeted comprehensible input can easily provide.

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