

# Teaching from the Learners' Perspectives

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## Abstract

When a language instructor becomes a student and participates in a language class, s/he notices things that s/he did not notice when teaching his/her own class. Based on his own experience as a student of Spanish, the author maintains that many of the problems learners encounter in the classroom stem from the instructor's neglect of the learners' cognitive needs (i.e., failing to meet the conditions necessary for processing information effectively). After pointing out the link between the classroom problems and findings from cognition research, the author claims that the best way to avoid these problems is to assume the perspectives of the learners when making lesson plans and executing these plans in the classroom.

## 要 旨

外国語教師が自ら外国語の学習者となり、外国語授業を体験すると、教師として教壇に立っていたときには思いもよらなかった新たな発見をすることが多い。本稿では、筆者自身がスペイン語学習者になった経験をもとに、教師の視点と学習者の視点の違いを洗い出し、視点の違いから生まれる要素が学習にどのような影響を及ぼすのかを考察した。その結果、学習に悪影響を与える要素の多くは、教師が学習者の認知的ニーズ（効果的な情報処理プロセスに必要な条件を満たすこと）を考慮していない点に起因することがわかった。そのような問題の解決策として、教師が教案作成時や授業時において、学習者の視点に立つ努力をすることを提唱する。

**Keywords** : language instructor, students' perspectives, cognitive needs

キーワード：外国語教師、学習者の視点、認知的ニーズ

Recently, we have seen a multitude of theories and findings in cognition-based SLA research, but many classroom teachers seem to find it difficult to make direct connections between these findings and what happens in the actual classroom. In contrast, social-based SLA theories are popular among classroom teachers, and there is growing enthusiasm in making classroom activities social and interactive.

SLA researchers and classroom teachers alike recognize the importance of social factors in language learning. Language is used in and developed through social interaction, and much research has been carried out examining how people negotiate meaning and modify their language in response to communication breakdown (e.g., Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994; Gass, Mackey, & Pica, 1998; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Loschky, 1994), and how learners help each other in learning the target language (Brooks, Donato, & McGlone, 1997; DiCamilla & Anton, 1997; Donato, 1994; Ohta, 1997; Swain, 1998). The emphasis on the use of pair and group work in the classroom reflects the language teachers' recognition of the importance of social interaction in language learning.

While there is no doubt that social interaction is important in the classroom, many teachers seem to pay less attention to cognitive factors such as students' information processing procedures (e.g., attention, encoding, retention, recall) once they succeed in making their classroom activities interactive. In the next section, I would like to present my own experience in taking Spanish courses at a university and show how my observations in the classroom suggest the neglect of cognitive factors by classroom teachers.

### **What Language Teachers Can Discover From Becoming a Student Themselves**

It is easy to imagine that a language teacher would be able to gain many valuable insights from becoming a student of a foreign language. For this reason, I decided to enroll in beginning and intermediate Spanish classes for five quarters at a university in the United States to look at learning and teaching from a student's point of view. The Spanish courses at this institution were based on communicative language teaching, and the classroom instructions incorporated social interaction as much as possible. The textbooks used were *¿Sabias Qué...?* (VanPatten, Lee, & Ballman, 1996) for beginning Spanish and *¿Qué te parece...?* (Lee, Young, Wolf, &

Chandler, 1996) for intermediate Spanish courses. As expected, after I became a student myself, I started to notice things that I could not have noticed if I were just teaching my own language as a teacher. One of the things that I noticed frequently was that many of the problems I experienced as a student during the learning process arose from the performance/techniques of the language teachers rather than from the design of the course or the materials used in the instruction.

In the next section, I will present some of the comments I frequently uttered to myself during the class. These comments are not based on a single instance. Rather, they represent many occurrences of the similar conditions across many classes.

### Cognitive Problems

When we examine the problems occurring in the classroom, we notice that many of them have to do with cognitive issues such as attention and memory. As mentioned above, Spanish courses in this particular institution were well-conceptualized, based on the spirit of proficiency-oriented language teaching. Still, we find problems that arise from the neglect of the students' needs in the classroom. What this suggests is that the classroom teachers need to do more than just make classroom interactions social and communicative.

In this section, I will list some of the comments that I uttered to myself during the class.

*(1) "Please slow down! I have no idea what you are saying." (Not modulating the target language)*

In the Spanish classes that I took, teachers spoke mostly Spanish throughout the class. Very little English was used even during the time of the grammar explanation. There is a widely spread theory about language learning that immersing the learner totally in the target language is the quickest way to teach a foreign language. This, in fact, is the philosophy of the Direct Method (Richards & Rogers, 2001), and many people still agree with this philosophy to a greater or lesser extent. There is nothing wrong with the idea of maximizing exposure to the target language, but some caution is necessary. For instance, some teachers take this philosophy to mean that, aside from slowing down a little, they should not modulate their speech in the classroom; they should just speak as they normally would. They seem to say, "Don't worry about

the words that the students haven't learned, or the grammar they haven't learned. They may not understand everything, but they will pick up something. After all, isn't it better if the students receive authentic natural language?" The problem with this line of thinking is that it ignores Krashen's well-known principle of "i+1" (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Terrel, 1983) that is believed to be necessary for acquisition to occur. We also have much evidence from other cognition research that learners do not learn what they cannot process cognitively. Much research has accumulated evidence for the importance of processing for learning. Consider the following principles, for example:

- (a) Learners cannot pay attention to linguistic form and meaning at the same time (VanPatten, 1990)
- (b) Learners generally process for global meaning (Lee & VanPatten, 1995)
- (c) Attention and awareness are necessary for learning (Tomlin & Villa, 1994; Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 1995, 2001).
- (d) Phonetic representations must be available in working memory for a sound sequence to be stored in memory (Baddeley, 2004; Ellis & Beaton, 1993, Ellis, 1996, Gathercole, 1994)

Suppose, for instance, that a teacher asks a beginning Japanese student to close the door by saying the following at a natural speed without any simplification or modification:

*Johnson-san, sumimasen kedo ushiro no tobira shimete kuremasen ka?*

'Mr. Johnson, sorry, but, would you close the back door?'

This would be an instance of genuine communication. Suppose that the learner did not catch much of what the teacher said but somehow understood the message because the teacher was pointing at the door and the hallway was noisy. Proponents of "speak normally" would be satisfied because the message was successfully communicated. But is this really sufficient to learn something from this utterance? For instance, if we wanted the learner to learn the word *tobira* ('door') incidentally from this instance of communication, just understanding the message may not be sufficient.

As VanPatten (1990) and Lee and VanPatten (1995) state, learners will, under normal circumstances, try to catch the global meaning of the message, and when they attend to the global meaning, they do not necessarily pay attention to the linguistic form in which the message was encoded. That is, once they understand the message, they do not expend any more effort to attend to the linguistic form itself. Furthermore, the cognitive system needs to direct attention to the existence of this word as a prerequisite for learning (Tomlin & Villa, 1994; Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 1995, 2001). If the learner stops processing after extracting the global message, however, there is a great possibility that the word will get passed over without receiving sufficient attention to its form and its form-meaning relationship.

Furthermore, even if attention is paid, the phonetic representation of the attended word needs to be available in working memory long enough to be processed sufficiently (Baddeley, 2004; Ellis & Beaton, 1993, Ellis, 1996, Gathercole, 1994). What this means is that the sound sequence /tobira/ must be available in working memory long enough to receive sufficient processing. A sound can decay very quickly (in 2 seconds) if it is not rehearsed or recycled in working memory (Gathercole, 1994). To put it more plainly, if the learner cannot even repeat the utterance right after he has understood the message, he probably has not learned much of the linguistic form in which the message was encoded. Although some level of phonological learning (such as prosodic features of the utterance) may occur under the level of awareness (Carroll, 2006a, 2006b), such a weak phonological representation would not serve as an anchor to which the meaning is associated; you would need a much more solid sound form in order to associate a meaning to it. If we expect the learners to learn expressions from our classroom speech, therefore, we need to carefully present our utterances so that the students' cognitive systems can process the input sufficiently. Simply providing them with natural input is not sufficient. Classroom speech needs to be carefully modulated by keeping the students' cognitive processing in mind. This should be possible without compromising the authenticity of the natural input.

(2) *"I have no idea what that picture is supposed to indicate. Just tell me what it means in English and stop putting me through this guessing game!" (The problem of guessing game)*

Many teachers feel that the use of the students' native language is taboo, and

they prefer to use pictures and real objects to teach vocabulary items. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this general approach, but the practical problem is that the activity often ends up a guessing game. This problem is generally called “problem of induction” (Quine, 1960), and it may be more prevalent than we think. Imagine, for instance, that the teacher wants to teach the word, *kaban* (‘bag’). It is a simple word that refers to a very concrete object. What the teacher often does is pick up one of his/her students’ bags and say *kaban*. The teacher would think that the meaning is clear but sometimes, students think it means ‘backpack’ instead of ‘bag.’ If a teacher insists on avoiding English (L1), then s/he needs to plan very carefully how to manipulate the learners’ guessing process. By anticipating that learners may erroneously think that *kaban* means ‘backpack,’ the teacher can pick up some different kinds of bags so that learners can eliminate the wrong hypotheses.

Another way of avoiding the guessing game is using L1 for clarification. Most teachers, however, feel strong reservations against using L1 in the classroom for good reasons. They want to maximize the use of the target language and have students get used to getting along only in the target language. It appears, however, that we need to weigh the benefits of avoiding L1 versus using L1.

When is the use of L1 beneficial? I believe that using L1 during the phase when learners are trying to understand the meaning of a word or the function of a grammatical structure would perhaps do more good than harm. However, using L1 might be harmful when the students practice making the association between the linguistic form and its meaning/function in memory. Learners have to first understand the meaning/function clearly and then establish the direct association between the form and its meaning/function without L1 mediation. There is little harm in using L1 to assist the understanding of the form-meaning relationship if other means are insufficient. If teachers can clarify things better by using L1, there is no reason to put their students through a guessing game.

*(3) “Your rule on ‘No English’ is discouraging me from asking clarification questions. Let me use English when I really need to clarify something.” (Downside of L2 only policy)*

This comment is closely related to the issue raised in the previous comment. On my very first day of Spanish class, the teacher made an announcement, “From now

on, we will use only Spanish in this classroom.” I said to myself, “You cannot be serious. I have not been taught any Spanish yet…” Because this teacher was very particular about this rule, I was afraid to even ask my classmate what page of the textbook we were on. As a result, I kept quiet and often went on for a while without knowing what page we were on.

I also often felt a strong need to ask questions in English when I was unsure about something. But the rule against the use of English kept me from getting clarification because I could not ask complicated questions in Spanish. My teachers' comment “If you need to ask questions, try asking in Spanish” also frustrated us. Strong enforcement of the “target language (L2)-only policy” deprives students of the chance to resolve ambiguities. This is not only damaging psychologically but also bad for learning as well. Not only do anxiety and frustration build, but also students have to proceed with uncertainty about L2. According to Brooks, Donato, and McGlone (1997), student talk in L1 is often the sign of student involvement in the activity. They found that the times when students use L1 during classroom activities are when they want to clarify what they are supposed to do. Once the students become familiar with the structure of the classroom activities, they gradually start using L2 wherever they can. Maximizing the use of L2 is a good policy, but we need to be flexible and allow some clarification in L1 when needed.

(3) *“Wait, Ms. B., I’m not done yet.” (Giving insufficient time for doing the activity)*

The teachers who are adhering to the course syllabus sometimes forget to give students sufficient time to do each activity. My comment here is a reaction to this. Teachers start running out of time and cut time for an activity. Again, students do not learn something that they do not have time to process. The parts of the activity that the students did not spend much time on or did not even get to will not be learned. This obvious principle often seems to be forgotten by the classroom teachers. It is not what the teacher covers in the lesson that is important for each student's learning; it is whether and how the student processes the material that is important.

(4) *“I can’t hear what my classmates are saying.” (Rest of the students not being involved)*

This comment also points to the same principle as the previous one. There were

about 28 students in most of my Spanish classes. The teacher called on one student and talked with him/her for a while. It was not a problem when the student talked loud enough, but very often, the rest of us could not hear what the student was saying. In such an instance, not many teachers ask the student to repeat what the student said for the rest of us to hear. The teacher needs to make sure that everybody can hear what others are saying and get everyone involved at all times. We do not learn anything from what we do not hear.

(5) *“Why are we doing this?” (Not stating the objective)*

Very few teachers from whom I took a class informed us about the purpose of the classroom activity that they told us to do. I, as a language teacher, could usually guess the purpose of the activities, but many other students often seemed unaware of the exact purpose of some activities. The way we process information is largely determined by our frame of mind. We process the same material differently depending on our mindset. Reading something with an expectation that we will be tested on the details of its content and reading the same material for getting the gist of it requires a very different mental activity. In the same way, the same communicative activity would be processed differently depending on the learner’s mindset. Consider, for instance, doing a role-play. If the students are told that the goal of the role-play is to practice using the target grammar structure, they would make more effort to use the structure and aim for accuracy of the structure even if their speech becomes slow and halting. On the other hand, if they are not given any direction as to how they should do the activity, they may avoid the new structure and use a more simple structure to maintain fluency. Students can be incredibly passive, and the teachers should never assume that the students understand their intended goal for an activity. It is always best to tell the students explicitly the goal of an activity. This also means that the teachers themselves need to know the goal of the activity clearly (“What is our goal here?” “Do we want students to aim for accuracy or fluency?”).

### **Teaching from Students’ Perspectives**

One of the best ways to meet the students’ psychological needs is taking the perspective of their students when the teachers plan and execute their lessons in the classroom. This “teaching from the students’ perspective” approach is a pedagogical



application of the “information processing” theory in SLA. This approach maintains that the teachers must get into the mind of their students and observe their own teaching from the student’s point of view. This is different from the teachers thinking about how their students will perceive their lesson from the “teacher’s point of view.” What I am proposing goes beyond this. The teachers almost literally have to be one of their students. In their mind, they have to sit among their students, facing the blackboard and themselves, and imagine in detail how the students would process the information that is presented. “Would I understand these directions?” “What is my mindset?” “How motivated would I feel about this activity?” “How would this activity help me in forming a hypothesis about this form’s function?” “Would I know how to use this expression from this information alone?” “Would I be able to guess the meaning of this word from this picture?” The teachers must try to get into the mind of their students and see themselves from the students’ points of view.

Of course, this task is not easy because the perspective of the teachers is constrained at least in two ways. First, if they are native speakers of the language that they are teaching, they do not know what it is like to learn their language totally from the basics. Assuming the students’ perspectives means that the teachers have to imagine that they do not know the words, expressions and grammar rules that they actually know so well. Clearly, this is not an easy task. Second, teachers are busy thinking about their own goals in the lesson and what they have to do in the classroom. When they teach, they have to cover their planned materials within a limited time period. They have to manage the class, making sure students are doing what they are supposed to be doing. They also have to answer questions, and yet maintain the flow of the lesson. There are so many things on their mind that it is difficult to take the students’ perspectives.

However, whether the teacher succeeds in taking the students’ perspectives influences how well the students learn from their lessons. I believe that there is a great gap between the teacher’s perception of the classroom activities and the students’ perception of the same classroom activities. Clearly, what students learn is based directly on their own subjective experience and not the teacher’s.

This relative disregard for the students’ subjective experience in the classroom is unfortunately also reflected in many of the professional discussions in foreign language pedagogy. We find that many discussions in this field center around what

teachers should do. “What should we, as teachers, do to teach this grammar point?” “What should we do to teach this function?” “How should we present the vocabulary items?” In my opinion, what teachers should do follows naturally from knowing what students should do. If the teachers know what the students should be doing to implement the appropriate cognitive processing strategies in learning, all they need to do is consider how they should act to produce in their students such processing strategies.

### Conclusion

Classroom teachers may tend to forget what it is like to be a student learning a new foreign language. Sometimes they need to go back and be a student themselves in order to experience what really is important in the classroom for the students.

The precautions presented in this article are not difficult to follow if teachers make a habit of taking the students’ perspectives when planning their lesson plans and executing those plans in the classroom. Teachers should always keep in mind that it is what the students themselves do that leads to their learning.

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