

5 OBSERVING SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

In this chapter we will explore different ways in which researchers have observed and described what goes on in second language classrooms. Before we do this, let us take a moment to reflect on the differences between natural and instructional language learning settings. We will then look at transcripts from two classrooms and try to understand what principles guide the teacher in each case.

Comparing instructional and natural settings for language learning

Most people would agree that learning a second language in a natural acquisition context is not the same as learning in the classroom. Many believe that learning on the street is more effective. This belief may be based on the fact that most successful learners have had exposure to the language outside the classroom. What is special about natural language learning? Can we create the same environment in the classroom? Should we? Or are there essential contributions that only instruction and not natural exposure can provide?

Activity

Natural and instructional settings

Natural acquisition contexts should be understood as those in which the learner is exposed to the language at work or in social interaction or, if the learner is a child, in a school situation where most of the other children are native speakers of the target language and where the instruction is directed toward native speakers rather than toward learners of the language.

Traditional instructional environments (for example, grammar translation and audiolingual) are those where the language is being taught to a group of second or foreign language learners. In this case, the focus is on the language

itself, rather than on information which is carried by the language. The teacher's goal is to see to it that students learn the vocabulary and grammatical rules of the target language. The goal of learners in such courses is often to pass an examination rather than to use the language for daily communicative interaction.



Communicative, *content-based* and *task-based* instructional environments also involve learners whose goal is learning the language itself, but the style of instruction places the emphasis on interaction, conversation, and language use, rather than on learning *about* the language. The topics which are discussed in communicative and task-based instructional environments are often topics of general interest to the learner, for example, how to reply to a classified advertisement from a newspaper. In content-based instruction, the focus of a lesson is usually on the subject-matter, such as history or mathematics, which students are learning through the medium of the second language. In these classes, the focus may occasionally be on the language itself, but the emphasis is on using the language rather than on talking about it. The language which teachers use for teaching is not selected on the basis of teaching a specific feature of the language, but on leading learners to use the language in a variety of contexts. Students' success in these courses is often measured in terms of their ability to 'get things done' in the second language, rather than on their accuracy in using certain grammatical features.

The chart opposite is similar to the one in Chapter 2 (page 33), in which we compared the profiles of first and second language learners. Think about the characteristics of the different contexts for second language learning. Mark a plus (+) in the chart if the characteristic in the left-hand column is typical of

the learning environment in the three remaining columns. Mark a minus (–) if it is not something you usually find in that context. Write ‘?’ if you are not sure.

Characteristics	Natural acquisition	Traditional instruction	Communicative instruction
Error correction			
Learning one thing at a time			
Ample time available for learning			
High ratio of native speakers to learners			
Variety of language and discourse types			
Pressure to speak			
Access to modified input			

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As you look at the pattern of + and – signs you have placed in the chart, you will probably find it matches the following descriptions.

When people learn languages at work, in social interactions, or in the playground, their experiences are often quite different from those of learners in classrooms.

In natural acquisition settings

- Learners are rarely corrected. If their interlocutors can understand what they are saying, they do not remark on the correctness of the learners’ speech. They would probably feel it was rude to do so.
- Language is not presented step by step. In natural communicative interactions, the learner will be exposed to a wide variety of vocabulary and structures.
- The learner is surrounded by the language for many hours each day. Some of that language is addressed to the learner; much of it is simply ‘overheard’.
- The learner usually encounters a number of different people who use the target language proficiently.

- Learners observe or participate in many different types of language events: brief greetings, commercial transactions, exchanges of information, arguments, instructions at school or in the workplace. They may also encounter the written language in the form of notices, newspapers, posters, etc.
- Learners must often use their limited second language ability to respond to questions or get information. In these situations, the emphasis is on getting meaning across clearly, and more proficient speakers tend to be tolerant of errors that do not interfere with meaning.
- Modified input is available in many one-to-one conversations. In situations where many native speakers are involved in the conversation, however, the learner often has difficulty getting access to language he or she can understand.

The events and activities which are typical of traditional instruction differ from those encountered in natural acquisition settings. Traditional classrooms include grammar translation approaches in which there is considerable use of translation activities and grammatical rules, and audiolingual approaches where there is little use of the first language but where learners are expected to learn through repetition and habit formation.

In traditional instructional settings

- Errors are frequently corrected. Accuracy tends to be given priority over meaningful interaction.
- Input is structurally graded, simplified, and sequenced by the teacher and the textbook. Linguistic items are presented and practised in isolation, one item at a time, in a sequence from what is assumed to be 'simple' to that which is 'complex'.
- Learning is often limited to only a few hours a week.
- The teacher is often the only native or proficient speaker the student comes in contact with.
- Students experience a limited range of language discourse types (often a chain of Teacher asks a question/Student answers/Teacher evaluates response). The written language they encounter is selected to represent specific grammatical features rather than for its content.
- Students often feel great pressure to speak or write the second language and to do so correctly from the very beginning.
- Teachers often use the learners' native language to give instructions or in other classroom management events. However, when they use the target language, they tend to modify their language in order to ensure comprehension and compliance.

Not all language classrooms are alike. The conditions for learning differ in terms of the physical environment, the age and motivation of the students, the amount of time available for learning, and many other variables. Classrooms also differ in terms of the principles which guide teachers in their language teaching methods and techniques. Designers of communicative language teaching programs have sought to replace some of the characteristics of traditional instruction with those more typical of natural acquisition contexts. The communicative approach is based on innatist and interactionist theories of language learning and emphasizes the communication of meaning both between teacher and students and among the students themselves in group or pair work. Grammatical forms are focused on only in order to clarify meaning. The assumption is that learners can and must do the grammatical development on their own.

In communicative instructional settings

- There is a limited amount of error correction, and meaning is emphasized over form.
- Input is simplified and made comprehensible by the use of contextual cues, props, and gestures, rather than through *structural grading*.
- Learners usually have only limited time for learning. Sometimes, however, subject-matter courses taught through the second language can add time for language learning. A good example of this is immersion courses where most or all the subject-matter is taught to a group of students who are all second language learners.
- Contact with proficient or native speakers of the language is limited. As with traditional instruction, it is often only the teacher who is a proficient speaker. Learners have considerable exposure to the interlanguage of other learners. This naturally contains errors which would not be heard in an environment where the interlocutors are native speakers.
- A variety of discourse types are introduced through stories, role playing, and the use of 'real-life' materials such as newspapers, television broadcasts, and field trips.
- There is little pressure to perform at high levels of accuracy, and there is often a greater emphasis on comprehension than on production, especially in the early stages of learning.
- Modified input is a defining feature of this approach to instruction. The teacher in these classes makes every effort to speak to students in a level of language they can understand. In addition, other students speak a simplified language.

Activity

Classroom comparisons: teacher–student interactions

In this activity we are going to look at transcripts from two classrooms, one using a structure-based approach to teaching, and the other a communicative approach. Structure-based approaches emphasize language form through either metalinguistic instruction (for example, grammar translation) or pattern practice (for example, audiolingual).

With each transcript, there is a chart for you to check off whether certain things are happening in the interaction, from the point of view of the teacher and of the students. Before you begin reading the transcripts, study the following definitions of the categories used in the grids:

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------------|--|
| 1 | <i>Errors</i> | Are there errors in the language of either the teacher or the students? |
| 2 | <i>Error correction</i> | When grammatical errors are made, are they corrected? By whom? |
| 3 | <i>Genuine questions</i> | Do teachers and students ask questions to which they don't know the answer in advance? |
| 4 | <i>Display questions</i> | Do teachers ask questions they know the answers to so that learners can display their knowledge of the language (or lack of it)? |
| 5 | <i>Negotiation of meaning</i> | Do the teachers and students work to understand what the other speakers are saying? What efforts are made by the teacher? By the students? |
| 6 | <i>Metalinguistic comments</i> | Do the teachers and students talk <i>about</i> language, in addition to using it to transmit information? |

In the following excerpts, T represents the teacher, S represents a student. (The classroom examples in this chapter come from unpublished data collected by P. M. Lightbown, N. Spada, and B. Barkman.)

Classroom A: A structure-based approach

(Students in this class are 15-year-old French speakers.)

	Teacher	Student
Errors		
Feedback on errors		
Genuine questions		
Display questions		
Negotiation of meaning		
Metalinguistic comments		

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T OK, we finished the book—we finished in the book Unit 1, 2, 3. Finished. Workbook 1, 2, 3. So today we're going to start with Unit 4. Don't take your books yet, don't take your books. In 1, 2, 3 we worked in what tense? What tense did we work on? OK?

S Past

T In the past—What auxiliary in the past?

S Did

T Did (writes on board '1–2–3 Past'). Unit 4, Unit 4, we're going to work in the present, present progressive, present continuous—OK? You don't know what it is?

S Yes

T Yes? What is it?

S Little bit

T A little bit

S ...

T Eh?

S Uh, present continuous

T Present continuous? What's that?

S e–n–g

T i–n–g

S Yes

T What does that mean, present continuous? You don't know? OK, fine. What are you doing, Paul?

S Rien [nothing]

T Nothing?

S Rien—nothing

T You're not doing anything? You're doing *something*!

S Not doing anything.

- T You're doing *something*!
- S Not doing anything.
- T You're doing something—Are, are you listening to me? Are you talking with Marc? What are you doing?
- S No, no—uh—listen—uh—
- T Eh?
- S to you
- T You're you're listening to me.
- S Yes
- T Oh. (writes 'What are you doing? I'm listening to you' on the board)
- S Je—
- T What are you—? You're excited.
- S Yes
- T You're playing with your eraser. (writes 'I'm playing with my eraser' on the board). Would you close the door please, Bernard? Claude, what is he doing?
- S Close the door
- T He is closing the door. (writes 'He's closing the door' on the board) What are you doing, Mario?
- S Moi, I listen to you.
- T You're listening to me.
- S Yes
- T OK. Are you sleeping or are you listening to me?
- S I don't—moiti—moiti—, half and half.
- T Half and half, half sleeping, half listening.

Classroom B: A communicative approach

(Students in this class are 10-year-old French speakers. In this activity, they are telling their teacher and their classmates what 'bugs' them. They have written 'what bugs them' on a card or paper which they hold while speaking.)

	Teacher	Student
Errors		
Feedback on errors		
Genuine questions		
Display questions		
Negotiation of meaning		
Metalinguistic comments		

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- S It bugs me when a bee sting me.
- T Oh, when a bee stings me.
- S Stings me.
- T Do you get stung often? Does that happen often? The bee stinging many times?
- S Yeah.
- T Often? (Teacher turns to students who aren't paying attention) OK. Sandra and Benoît, you may begin working on a research project, hey? (Teacher turns her attention back to 'What bugs me')
- S It bugs me (inaudible) and my sister put on my clothes.
- T Ah! She borrows your clothes? When you're older, you may appreciate it because you can switch clothes, maybe. (Turns to check another student's written work) Mélanie, this is yours, I will check.—OK. It's good.
- S It bugs me when I'm sick and my brother doesn't help me—my—my brother, 'cause he—me—
- T OK. You know—when (inaudible) sick, you're sick at home in bed and you say, oh, to your brother or your sister: 'Would you please get me a drink of water?'—'Ah! Drop dead!' you know, 'Go play in the traffic!' You know, it's not very nice. Martin!
- S It bug me to have—
- T It bugs me. It bugzz me.
- S It bugs me when my brother takes my bicycle. Every day.
- T Every day? Ah! Doesn't your bro—' (inaudible) his bicycle? Could his brother lend his bicycle? Uh, your brother doesn't have a bicycle?
- S Yeah! A new bicycle (inaudible) bicycle.
- T Ah, well. Talk to your mom and dad about it. Maybe negotiate a new bicycle for your brother.
- S (inaudible)
- T He has a new bicycle. But his brother needs a new one too.
- S Yes!
- T Hey, whoa, just a minute! Jean?
- S Martin's brother has—
- T Martin, who has a new bicycle? You or your brother?
- S My brother.
- T And you have an old one.
- S (inaudible)
- T And your brother takes your old one?
- S (inaudible) bicycle
- T His bicycle! How old is your brother?
- S March 23.
- T His birthday?
- S Yeah!

T And how old was he?

S Fourteen.

T Fourteen. Well, why don't you tell your brother that when he takes your bike you will take his bike. And he may have more scratches than he figures for. OK?

Characteristics of input in the two classrooms

Classroom A

- 1 Errors: Very few on the part of the teacher. However the teacher's speech does have some peculiar characteristics typical of this type of teaching, for example, the questions in statement form—often asked with dramatic rising intonation (for example, 'You don't know what it is?'). It's hard to say whether students make errors, because they say as little as possible.
- 2 Error correction: Yes, whenever students *do* make errors, the teacher reacts.
- 3 Genuine questions: Yes, a few, but they are almost always related to classroom management. No questions from the students.
- 4 Display questions: Yes, almost all of the teacher's questions are of this type. Interestingly, however, the students sometimes interpret display questions as genuine questions (T: What are you doing, Paul? S: Rien.). The teacher wants students to produce a sentence—any sentence—in the 'present continuous' but the student worries that he's about to get in trouble for doing 'nothing'.
- 5 Negotiation of meaning: Very little, learners have no need to paraphrase or request clarifications, and no opportunity to determine the direction of the discourse; the teacher is only focused on the formal aspects of the learners' language. All the effort goes into getting students to produce a sentence with the present continuous form of the verb.
- 6 Metalinguistic comments: Yes, this is how the teacher begins the lesson and lets the students know what really matters!

Classroom B

- 1 Errors: Yes, when students speak but hardly ever when the teacher does. Nevertheless, the teacher's speech also contains incomplete sentences, simplified ways of speaking, and an informal speech style.
- 2 Error correction: Yes, sometimes the teacher repeats what the student has said with the correct form (for example, 'he bugzz me'—pointing out the third person singular). However, this correction is not consistent or intrusive as the focus is primarily on letting students express their meanings.

- 3 Genuine questions: Yes, almost all of the teacher's questions are focused on getting information from the students. The students are not asking questions in this exchange. However, they do sometimes intervene to change the direction of the conversation.
- 4 Display questions: No, because there is a focus on meaning rather than on accuracy in grammatical form.
- 5 Negotiation of meaning: Yes, from the teacher's side, especially in the long exchange about who has a bicycle!
- 6 Metalinguistic comments: No. Even though the teacher clearly hopes to get students to use the third person *-s* in the simple present, she does not say so in these words.

Summary of the two classroom excerpts

You have no doubt noticed how strikingly different these transcripts from the two classrooms are, even though the activities are both teacher-centred. In the transcript from classroom A, the focus is on form (i.e. grammar) and in classroom B, it is on meaning. In classroom A, the only purpose of the interaction is to practise the present continuous. Although the teacher uses real classroom events and some humour to accomplish this, there is no doubt about what really matters here. There is no real interest in what students are doing, but rather in their ability to say it. There is a primary focus on correct grammar, display questions, and error correction in the transcript from classroom A.

In the transcript from classroom B, the primary focus is on meaning, conversational interaction, and genuine questions, although there are some brief references to grammatical accuracy when the teacher feels it is necessary.

Classroom observation schemes

The categories you just used in your examination of the classroom transcripts represent some of the main features which have been used to characterize differences in second language teaching. Many more categories exist and these are often combined to create a *classroom observation scheme*. A classroom observation scheme can be used to describe a range of teacher and learner behaviours. Many different observation schemes have been developed for use in second language classrooms. They differ in several respects including the number of categories they contain, whether they focus on qualitative or quantitative descriptions, whether they are used throughout a lesson or on selected samples of classroom interaction, and whether they are used by observers while they are in the classroom or to analyse audio or video recordings or transcripts of such recordings.