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THE ROLE OF EXPLICIT GRAMMAR IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING: INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS OF PROCESSING INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT: *The role of explicit grammar teaching has become a point of controversial debate over the last decades in the field of second language teaching. Krashen's Monitor Theory questioned the role of formal instruction and relegated it to a minor driving force in the process of interlanguage development. However, research has by now shown sufficient evidence supporting its beneficial effects and so a return to focus on grammar has been demanded. In order to combine research findings with a communicative approach to language teaching, Long (1991) proposes a focus on form embedded in communicative tasks and motivated by a communicative need. In this paper we will adopt Long's proposal and we will make suggestions as to how to carry it out effectively in the classroom. After an introduction on the extent to which formal instruction can contribute to interlanguage development, we will move to a discussion on what is meant by formal instruction and on the need of a pedagogical grammar. Then, some instructional considerations as well as a description of tasks and techniques in focus on form will be given. The paper concludes with a description of VanPatten's Processing Instruction and its validity as an instructional resource.*

KEYWORDS: *Explicit grammar - Language teaching - Processing instruction - Pedagogical grammar.*

INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH in the field of second language (SL) teaching and learning has recently suggested the need to provide learners at certain levels with explicit grammar instruction in the general framework of communicative language teaching. It seems to be the case that some competence errors cannot be avoided or corrected without the necessary linguistic information.

Nevertheless, the 80's and the 90's saw a reprobate attitude towards formal instruction in the SL classroom. While communicative competence was the desired goal, the study of the correct usage of a linguistic feature was questioned and even labeled as counterproductive in developing the learner's *interlanguage*.¹

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¹ Term coined by Selinker (1972) to refer to the linguistic system that the learner constructs based on the language to which he/she is exposed.

This position partly derives from Krashen's (1981) theory of second language acquisition (SLA), the Monitor Theory. Extending Chomsky's view about mother tongue acquisition to SLA and based on the findings of interlanguage studies,¹ Krashen postulated the existence of two independent systems in the development of the learner's competence in a SL, *acquisition* and *learning*. While *acquisition* was described as a subconscious process that resulted in an "acquired competence," *learning* constituted a conscious process that resulted in an explicit knowledge of a few "easy" grammar rules of the target language and that acted as a Monitor or editor in the output.² This theory supported that «acquisition is more important than learning» (1982, p. 32) and posited as the true causative variables of SLA a comprehensible input slightly superior ($i+1$) to the learner's current level and an 'opening' to that input by the learner (low affective filter). Moreover this theory supported that «learning does not "turn into" acquisition» (1982, p. 83).³

According to this theory one may offer a hypothesis that *learning* is not possible in young children, since «the potential for extensive Monitor use is hypothesized to emerge with formal operations, at around puberty» (Krashen, 1982, p. 95). In the same manner one might question the benefits of formal instruction for learners at intermediate levels or beyond, and in a natural or informal environment: "the classroom should be especially valuable for beginners, those who cannot easily utilize the informal environment for input" (Krashen 1982, p. 33). Further, one might question the learner's capacity for monitor use in open and spontaneous conversation, since the required conditions are rarely met. According to this theory, a very limited status was granted to *learning* and a very poor role to formal instruction, being often relegated to a non-existent practice in the SL classroom.

However, Long (1983) examined the effects of formal instruction compared to natural exposure based on the results of 11 studies and arrived at the conclusion that formal instruction was beneficial (1) for children and adults; (2) for beginning, intermediate, and advanced learners; (3) in tests of discrete and integrative features; (4) in environments both helpful and hindering to acquisition. This frame of thinking also encompassed the results of Norris and Ortega (2000), who analyzed the effects of different types of SL instruction from 49 studies performed during the 80's and 90's, claiming the effectiveness of SL instruction.

At this point, the debate should focus on how to reconcile research findings supporting a "natural order" of SLA impervious to formal instruction and ample evidence supporting the effectiveness of SL formal instruction. The krashenian position does not account for this debate. It holds that acquisition and learning are two independent systems and that the effects of formal instruction are «peripheral and fragile» (1992, p. 409) and only abundant if measured with tasks that maxi-

¹ Research findings suggest the existence of an "accuracy order" in the acquisition of grammatical features that is impervious to instruction and a "sequence of acquisition" in the mastery of each feature. See Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) for a detailed review.

² Under the following conditions: the performer must (1) have time; (2) be focused on form, and (3) know the rule (Krashen, 1981).

³ Except in the case when a learner A consistently uses rule X as a Monitor over his/her own output, and so that output serves as comprehensible input ' $i+1$ ' at the moment he/she is 'ready' to acquire such previously learned rule X (Krashen, 1982).

mize monitor use. The opposing view sustains that implicit knowledge emerges from explicit knowledge (*acquisition* and *learning* in Krashenian terms) if the learner performs an abundant communicative practice. In an intermediate position, Ellis (1994) discusses a possible 'weak' relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge of a language. The former acts as a 'facilitator' in the development of the second if it (1) brings the learner's attention to features that he/she would otherwise miss (i.e. *notice*) and (2) allows the learner to compare his/her output to the input he/she receives (i.e. *notice the gap*). This latter hypothesis seems to be consistent with research findings and offers a *raison d'être* to formal instruction in the SL classroom.

Ultimately, as a way to implement such theory in the SL classroom, i.e. a way to implement formal instruction while making communicative language teaching happen, Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998) propose *focus on form* (FonF)¹ as a possible direction to undertake:

focus on *form* [...] overtly draw students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication. (Long 1991, pp. 45-46)

focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features – by the teacher and/or one or more students- triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production. (Long, Robinson 1998, p. 23)

Undoubtedly, this is a complicated question since it involves answering questions such as what forms to focus on, which techniques to adopt in order to focus on form, or when to introduce grammatical and metalinguistic reflection. Below we pursue the subject. Following a discussion on what teaching grammar implies and the choice of a pedagogical grammar, we offer some instructional considerations and a wide range of tasks and techniques to focus on form. The paper concludes with a description of VanPatten's Processing Instruction (1996) and its validity as an instructional resource.

WHAT IT IS MEANT BY TEACHING GRAMMAR

We begin with the assumption that teaching and learning grammar should be perceived as the role of reflection upon usage in developing students' communicative competence and the procedures to carry out such a reflection effectively. This is considered in a framework that regards language as a set of systems of combined linguistic and non linguistic codes. Thus, 'teaching grammar' is perceived as how the study of grammatical contents, i.e. the description of the linguistic systems of a language, may contribute to develop communicative capacities. This task implies the unfolding of a metalinguistic or metacommunicative conscience and the learning of certain language performance schemes and certain language knowledge schemes. Accordingly, teaching should be developed based on a linguistic activity but completed with a metalinguistic activity.

As such, it is necessary to insist on language teaching devoting time and space

¹ *Focus on form* as opposed to *focus on formS* (which prioritizes formal correction versus discourse competence development) and *focus on meaning* (which prioritizes discourse competence development and ignores formal aspects).

to reflecting on the object, thus complementing and making sense of activities designed to improve the usage. It makes no sense to go such lengths as to teach students the rudiments of morphology and syntax when they barely know how to correctly and fluently write or speak. Teaching grammar is only useful if it fits into a larger coherent model of linguistic education.

The traditional debate over the role of grammar in classroom teaching is still in force due to several reasons. In the first place, carrying out in class such a reflection about language implies having previously questioned the model of linguistic description to be used in class. Secondly, such a reflection is supposed to have positive repercussions in the students' verbal competence, even though some scholars suggest this is not the case (Bronckart 1985).

There is by now considerable evidence to show that learning of grammatical knowledge is useful for SL learners (Long 1983, 1988; for an updated review, see Norris, Ortega 2000). It is a question of promoting theoretical reflection about language usage, about something the student already possesses and whose deep knowledge will help him/her attain a greater level of linguistic control (J. Tusón 1980). Not even when considering the fundamentals of current communicative and functional approaches can we disregard grammatical contents in language teaching,¹ since choosing in a grammatical system is a prerequisite in the usage of language for communication (Littlewood 1994).

In a communicative approach to language teaching, the grammatical system is relevant and as penetrated, learners achieve to communicate with a greater effectiveness. On the one hand, grammatical competence is identified as a dimension of the communicative competence (Canale 1983; Canale, Swain 1996). On the other hand, there is a focus on communication rather than language as object from a didactics standpoint. If we consider both previous assumptions, there is a need to keep active the connections between the grammatical forms and the meanings they convey, so that the linguistic system can easily integrate into the learner's communicative system.

At the first level, this grammar is that implicit grammar that every learner acquires as he/she deepens into the knowledge of a language, the set of regularities that form the system of a language and whose mastery is necessary for communication. At the second level, it is an explicit grammar, the reflection on the structure and functioning of the language. In this framework, it is worth mentioning the tendency in recent Linguistics to break the division between structure and usage in favor of a more integrative vision. It is not so much a matter of structures as something independent working in usage, but the conditions for language usage determining the structures themselves. The code is then a set of stereotyped strategies to perform frequently repeated actions.

¹ Llobera (1995, p. 7) gives some clues about possible reasons of such statement: Like the possibility of subscribing to the theory of the uselessness of learning language forms, of grammar in short, excusing on communication as the main thing. It is likely we would not have come to such simplifications if linguistic communication had not been mistaken with mere face-to-face exchanges in the shape of more or less believable micro-dialogues, forgetting about larger interventions or speech turns.

WHAT GRAMMAR? NEED OF A PEDAGOGICAL GRAMMAR

The next question to answer is the type of grammar that can help learners of a certain level most efficient in their understanding of the target language structure. Such grammar should serve two purposes. In the first instance, it should develop the learners' linguistic potential, i.e. their linguistic competence as part of the overall communicative competence. In the second instance, it should help them to understand the linguistic system they possess, considering that reflection upon language, according to the level, will occupy a secondary position since it will be a way to organize in the reflexive level what is already possessed in practice.

Therefore there is a need to develop what has come to be called "pedagogical grammar" (Álvarez Méndez 1987) of the different languages, a task proposed but not yet carried out satisfactorily due to the difficulty associated with concepts and terminology. Such a didactic or pedagogical grammar gets justified from a cognitive and pragmatic perspective and by the methodological option. It takes into account learners' levels and capacities and tries to present in an implicit way normative aspects in relation to communicative adequacy. Thus, one aspect that can be assured is that it should not be a formalist and theoretical grammar full of conceptual abstraction. Such a grammar would appear difficult and useless to improve learners' language handling. It should be a use-oriented grammar that would answer the question: what should a person know about a language to be able to use it successfully? It should be a grammar that displayed several working levels according to the addressee. It should also be designed bearing in mind the citizens that use the language as an instrument in their lives, «a rhetorical, practical, of consultation, use-oriented, not exhaustive, not formalized and not over-technical grammar» (Castellà 1994, p. 22).

Different fields offer contributions to the development of such a pedagogical or didactic grammar.

From the assumptions of the Glotodidactics, Titone (1976) calls for a psychological grammar. This grammar is justified by the fact that the more abstract the description of the system, the more distance from the teacher's and learner's real needs and from the modern language-teaching aim from a functional perspective of the linguistic analysis. This psychological grammar presents language as an instrument of expression and communication. It aims at adapting to learners' linguistic capacities and development, and at using inductive reasoning in the understanding of the language structure.

Psycholinguistics has proven relevance of grammars in the acquisition of a language. This aspect relates to metacognitive processes and more specifically to metalinguistic awareness (Pinto, Titone, González Gil 2000), i.e. the capacity to concentrate on language as an object of study in the scope of phonology, syntax, lexis, semantics and pragmatics. This capacity arises from an innate basis and develops with experience and practice, hence the recognition of practice and language reflection on intellectual development from psycholinguistic tendencies and cognitive learning approaches.

Reyes (1990) provides interesting reflections about the relationship between grammar and pragmatic approaches. In the current panorama of Linguistics two opposite ways can be distinguished according to Reyes to deal with such a relationship. Some scholars maintain that grammar should be analyzed as an *a priori*

with regards to the pragmatic functions. Others, on the contrary, try to design an *a posteriori* grammar, i.e. a reflection about the usage.

The first view establishes that the speaker has a system of rules and lexical units that allow him/her to produce texts in a way that both systems can come off the text to be studied in isolation. This view implies the understanding of language as a system of negatively defined oppositions (Saussure), and the existence of an ideal speaker who possesses the necessary rules to produce well-formed sentences in his/her language (Chomsky). As for the second view, it is not so much a matter of isolating and describing the system underlying the usage but of questioning the instability of the meanings not conceived outside of the texts.

An *a posteriori* grammar is a set of recognizable but never definite or complete linguistic patterns, which impose themselves from force of habit and decantation and get modified in usage. It is about conventions to communicate, not logical structures previous to communication (p. 91).

The *a priori* grammar regards the speaker as creator but his/her creativity is limited by the rules. An *a posteriori* grammar speaker is a creator since his/her grammar is a direct consequence of his/her need to produce texts. He/she uses certain linguistic patterns that end up settling and constituting a grammatical system.

According to Reyes (1990), be it as it may, all current views about language admit the paradox of the speaker as an innovator but not as original. He/she is free but governed by the rules, language is made but it needs to be re-made in every utterance: inevitably the speaker sees the world through his/her language.

Especially interesting is Pottier's view (1992, p. 219) as he creates a *grammar of semantic orientation*, i.e. «a grammar in which the mechanisms of discourse construction by the addresser were essential». It would co-exist with formalist grammars, whose determining criterion is morphosyntax. It states that discourse production emerges out of the speaker's purpose to communicate something at the conceptual level. In order to do so, the speaker chooses from semantic and syntactic possibilities offered by his/her language (level of language) up to the expression of an utterance (level of discourse).

The usefulness of this type of grammar becomes more evident as we consider syntax limits over semantics allowing many syntactic structures which are semantically ambiguous. The consequences of this proposal for the Didactics of Language are evident and place the teacher in the situation of thinking about what element – syntactic or semantic – to prioritize. According to Pottier (1992) – semantics will be the basis of grammatical reflection and it will supply syntax deficiencies, always considering the learner's syntactic and above all semantic competence in the first instance. It is all about considering the speaker's semantic competence as a basis of such a reflection.

In a different line of thought, Bernárdez (1994) proposes a speech linguistics whose teaching implications are evident. In the first place, the separation between theory and practice loses sense. Secondly, the teaching of usage is conceived as the teaching of linguistic strategies which, while determining the structure, also imply formal teaching of grammar, thus not remaining at the background as in traditional approaches. Thus, activities oriented to communicative improvement integrate into activities targeting language reflexive knowledge in a theoretical and methodological sense.

Bernárdez (1990) concludes that while recent language teaching has been linked to Linguistics theoretical assumptions, more recent developments point out in the same sense as the didactics, to which they proportionate a justification.

Romero (2002) goes further and points out the suitability of a functional-pragmatic perspective. Such a perspective would integrate and account for grammatical (morfosyntactic), semantic and cultural (pragmatic) rules governing communicative interactions. It would as well avoid radical and excluding dichotomies between form and function. Specifically, he mentions Dik's functional grammar (1989) as a model of description in which syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic functions integrate in a coherent way. He supports such a model because it assumes all functions determining semantic content and the expression of utterances. Romero (2002) stresses the didactic interest of a grammar targeting a reflection on the relationship between syntactic and semantic functions. However, he also stresses that such a typology of cases or functions is not well defined in the grammar and its application to teaching and learning remains difficult.

HOW TO TEACH GRAMMAR: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

Grammar teaching should respond to some overall principles as reference. First of all, it will be progressive and adjusted to the learners' evolution and previous knowledge. Since both use and reflection favor the communicative process, the first lessons will be specially focused on the use and domain of linguistic structures (Lenz 1912; Castro 1922; Brackenbury 1922). Then it will move forward to the observation of the relations (analysis) and finally to the synthesis and abstraction of the analysis (Fernández 1987).

Secondly, it will be contextualized, i.e. at any level theoretical reflection will be based on use, on specific linguistic relations inferred from a communicative situation to extrapolate such knowledge subsequently. Then it will be also motivating and functional; therefore grammar activities will not be unrelated and strange to learners' use of the language, but incentives to discover its structure and to make learners understand others and be understood in a better way.

Due to the observation and analysis abilities required, grammar is an ideal field to work through a discovery process. Speakers have a basis, their own linguistic competence, which they can use to discover a certain structure. Motivation, one of the big challenges of the teacher, gets feedback through such a discovery process and the success gained in following quests. As the learner's maturation increases, the inductive procedure – i.e. teachers help with key aspects to discover a possible explanation instead of a rule offering – will combine deductive procedures oriented to recognize regularities and apply them in oral and written output.

The implementation of these principles demands careful planning. Such a planning will be based on an initial diagnose of the learner's previous structures and on a hierarchy of contents according to complexity. In addition, a successful teaching requires the teacher to be equipped with mixed materials capable of stimulating the learner and providing him/her with opportunities to create and test out hypothesis on language work. Selecting materials will be carried out bearing in mind the relationship between the learner's cognitive capacity and the complexity of the target units. Learners' output will also be of importance since it will assure one of our final aims: getting a coherent, cohesive, adequate and acceptable output in

the target language (Zayas 1997). Thus, the essential aim becomes operative and instrumental: allowing language use in a structured way and not just linguistic structure analysis (Fernández 2002).¹

This view requires the integration of grammar activities into overall processes of production. They will entail observation and handling of linguistic forms, systematization of such observations, and application of acquired knowledge to language revision and production. In such processes, two methodological principles will be essential: considering learners' errors as a guide to grammar activity planning and considering language as a flexible tool that permits saying the same in a different way. In addition these processes will require considering the learner's linguistic competence, his/her individual features, the language learning process, and an overall and coherent presentation of the linguistic facts to allow a successful discovery of the system.

Thus activities will follow on a sequence of six stages as suggested by Fernández (1987): 1) motivational and language liberation; 2) motivated actualization; 3) discovery: handling, order change, substitution, writing, regularities and differences note-taking, expansion, hypothesizing, graphic representation, etc.; 4) hypothesis implementation; 5) generalization; 6) evaluation. Functional metalanguage will be also introduced and graded according to psycholinguistic rather than linguistic criteria. It is here where psychopedagogical worries have their *raison d'être*, in regard to the learner's strategies and procedures in his/her mastering of a second language.

TASKS AND TECHNIQUES OF FOCUS ON FORM

As mentioned previously, focus on form (FonF)² (Long 1991; Long, Robinson 1998) arises to implement grammar teaching in the SL classroom, yet it does not imply a return to traditional teaching of isolated grammatical features but attending to form when necessary and in a communicative environment. Below we describe some methodological procedures to implement focus on form (FonF) in the SL classroom according to two parameters: *when* to focus on form (Doughty, Williams 1998; Ellis *et al.* 2002) and *how* to focus on form (Doughty, Williams 1998).

As we consider *when* to focus on form, i.e. the moment of the instructional intervention, we encounter a reactive intervention and a pro-active intervention. In the first instance, an immediate intervention is proposed when an error or difficulty arises in the learner's comprehension or production. This type of intervention is more in line with the initial and subsequent FonF definition and with the principles underlying communicative language teaching, since there is not an *a priori* scheme of forms to focus on but an intervention on the learner's current errors. However, this view requires the teacher's ability to perceive the learner's errors and immediately design a strategy to deal with them effectively. In addition, this view might not be as effective when the classroom is composed by learners of different abilities and mother tongues. Thus, we agree with Doughty and Williams (1998) and

¹ This author mentions "metacommunicative activities of manipulation" (MAM).

² The term *focus on form* refers to an occasional attention to the formal properties of the target language within a communicative context and as a communicative need arises. In this sense, it differs from a *focus on formS* approach – or traditional discrete point grammar instruction –, and from a *focus on meaning* approach – or communicative language teaching approach.

Ellis *et al.* (2002) on the possibility of planning in advance some sort of strategy to deal with potential difficulties, i.e. a pro-active or preventive intervention.

With regards to the second parameter, i.e. how to focus on form, we find a number of possible tasks and techniques along a continuum of formal explicitness (Doughty, Williams 1998). In the most implicit extreme we find *input flood* and *task-essential language*. Input flood refers to the presentation of an input rich in the target formal feature so that the learner can easily notice it. In essential language tasks the learner is forced to use the target grammatical feature to complete the task successfully.

In a still very implicit degree we find *input enhancement* and *recasts*. In input enhancement the target form is highlighted in the input either typographically or auditorily to be perceived more effectively. Recasts are a type of implicit negative feedback that imply the teacher's reformulation of the learner's utterance providing the correct form so that he/she notices the difference between his/her own and the target production.

In a step further towards formal explicitness we find *negotiation of form*, *output enhancement* and *interaction enhancement*. In negotiation of form a linguistic reflection is promoted when the teacher asks the learner about his/her output with the purpose of getting feedback from an interlocutor. Output enhancement refers to the learner's own output reformulation in response to a teacher's clarification request of a specific target form. Interaction enhancement tasks aim at the learner's own output reformulation in a strategic interaction between learner and teacher and so that differences between learner's and target grammar are easily perceived.

A more overt degree of explicitness arises in *dictogloss tasks*, *consciousness-raising tasks* and *structured input activities*. In the first instance, the aim becomes reflecting on the target grammar and own production. The teacher reads a text rich in the target form and asks the learners to take notes so they can rewrite it afterwards in pairs or small groups. Then the learners' output is compared to the original text so they reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses. In consciousness-raising tasks a grammatical feature becomes a topic for conversation. As for structured input activities «learners are pulled away from their natural processing tendencies toward more optimal tendencies» (VanPatten 2002, p. 765) via a manipulated input where the learner depends on form to get the meaning.

Lastly, the *garden path* technique arises as a procedure to deal with overgeneralization errors. Learners work a number of cases containing the target form and as an overgeneralization error arises in a learner's output, it is presented as an exception to the rule.

The range of FonF tasks and techniques presented is wide and diverse. The implementation of one or another instructional device may vary and depend on several factors such as the learner's individual features or his/her specific needs. Thus, a flexible approach capable of holding one or more tasks and techniques might be a better solution to implement in the SL classroom than the rigid adoption of a single one.

AN INSTRUCTIONAL PROPOSAL: PROCESSING INSTRUCTION

As seen previously, structured input activities arise as one of the most explicit FonF procedures to implement grammar instruction in the SL classroom. This type of activities integrates into an overall pedagogical framework known as *Processing Instruc-*

tion (VanPatten 1996). Processing Instruction (PI) is best characterized as a type of instruction that works in unison with natural processes of acquisition and that is highly dependent on how learners process linguistic data in the language they attend to.

A full description of PI requires the examination of its underlying psycholinguistic premises. As a point of departure, PI is based on the premise that the acquisition of target forms arises from processing meaningful and comprehensible input rather than from production practice. Nonetheless, a role for output is described in language development as promoting linguistic fluency and accuracy. In the SLA model a number of sets of processes can be distinguished (FIG. 1). The first set of processes, *input processing* (I), involves learner's attention to linguistic data (input) and processing and retention in working memory of a subset of that input (intake) during comprehension. The second set of processes, *system change* (II), involves accommodation of intake and restructuring of the developing system. The third set of processes, *output processing* (III), concerns accessing the developing system and producing the target structures:



FIG. 1. Second Language Acquisition Model
 (Adapted from VanPatten, Cadierno 1993, p. 226).

Deriving from this acquisition model, if we pursue to alter the nature of the learner's implicit system, the driving force becomes input and the mechanisms related to input processing. While input is conceived of as the linguistic data the learner is exposed to, its processing involves filtering and holding a subset of that input in working memory. This processing is referred to as «those strategies and mechanisms that promote form-meaning connections during comprehension» (VanPatten, Cadierno 1993, p. 226), i.e. how the learner assigns meaning to forms during comprehension of an utterance. VanPatten (2002, p. 758) describes this model of input processing as a set of principles and corollaries (FIG. 2):

- P1:** Learners process input for meaning before they process it for form.
P1a: Learners process content words in the input before anything else.
P1b: Learners prefer processing lexical items to grammatical items for the same semantic information.
P1c: Learners prefer processing “more meaningful” morphology before “less” or “nonmeaningful” morphology.
- P2:** For learners to process form that is not meaningful, they must be able to process informational or communicative content at no (or little) cost to attention.
- P3:** Learners possess a default strategy that assigns the role of agent to the first noun they encounter in a sentence/utterance (first-noun strategy).
P3a: The first-noun strategy may be overridden by lexical semantics and event probabilities.
P3b: Learners will adopt other processing strategies for grammatical role assignment only after their developing system has incorporated other cues.
- P4:** Learners process elements in sentence/utterance initial position first.
P4a: Learners process elements in final position before elements in medial position.

FIG. 2. Principles of Input Processing (Adapted from VanPatten 2002, p. 758).

Nonetheless, these processing strategies and mechanisms are not always useful for interlanguage development. Let us examine a couple of examples. In the first instance, let us think of a beginner English learner of SL Spanish: according to the first-noun strategy (P₃), an instance such as (1) would be wrongly interpreted as (2):¹

- (1) *La sigue el señor.*
 Her-OBJ follows the man-SUBJ
 The man follows the woman.
 (2) **She follows the man.*

Similarly, according to P_{1b}, i.e. *learners prefer processing lexical items to grammatical items for the same semantic information*, in an instance such as (3)² the learner will most probably focus on the lexical item *ayer* to get the time when the action of the utterance took place, since the *communicative value*³ of the verb inflection *-aron* is diminished by the presence of the adverb *ayer*:

- (3) *Ayer mis padres me llamaron para decirme algo importante.*
 Yesterday my parents called me to tell me something important.

According to these theoretical premises, there is a need for instruction to focus on *input processing* rather than *output processing*, as found in traditional approaches. Therefore, PI arises as an instructional approach «to alter the processing strategies that learners take to the task of comprehension and to encourage them to make better form-meaning connections than they would if left to their own devices» (VanPatten 1996, p. 60). In the design of such an approach, VanPatten (1996) proposes three components:

1. Inform learners about the target form.
2. Inform learners about particular processing strategies that might negatively affect their assimilation of the target form.
3. Promote target form processing through *structured input activities*.

Thus, structured input activities aim at working on processing problems by means of a manipulated input that pushes learners to depend on the form of the target item to grasp its meaning so that the task can be completed successfully. Let us see an example for Spanish adjective agreement:

¹ From VanPatten, Cadierno (1993, p. 228).

² From VanPatten (2002, p. 758).

³ VanPatten posits this construct to refer to «the meaning that a form contributes to overall sentence meaning and is based on two features: [+/- inherent semantic value] and [+/- redundancy] ».

<p>Who Is It? Listen to each sentence in which a person is described. First, determine which person is being described. Then tick whether you agree or disagree with the statement.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. a. David Letterman___Madonna___ b. agree___disagree___ 2. a. David Letterman___Madonna___ b. agree___disagree 3. a. David Letterman___Madonna___ b. agree___disagree 	<p>Teacher reads:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Es dinámica. <i>(She) is dynamic-ADJ/FEMININE</i> 2. Es comprensivo. <i>(He)isunderstanding-ADJ/MASCULINE</i> 3. Es reservada. <i>(She) is reserved-ADJ/FEMININE</i>
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(Adapted from Lee, VanPatten 2003, p. 144).

Unlike English, adjectives must agree in number and gender with the nouns they modify in Spanish, but such grammatical markers add very little to the overall meaning of the utterance. Thus, as stated in the first corollary of the first input processing principle – *learners process content words in the input before anything else* – learners are not likely to rely on these grammatical markers to grasp the meaning of the utterance in comprehending the language, and mistakes in agreement rarely yield communicative breakdowns in producing the language. Therefore, adjective agreement seems a potential difficulty for English learners of Spanish. In order to overcome this difficulty, this activity focuses learners' attention on the grammatical markers to grasp the meaning of the utterances and thus complete the task successfully. Since in Spanish the subject pronoun is not obligatory, the learner must attend to grammatical gender to decide whether the utterances in the activity refer to David Letterman or Madonna and to express his/her opinion.

This activity might be described as a *referential activity* and as an *affective activity*. According to the type of answer, activities can be classified as referential activities and affective activities. While in the first instance a correct or incorrect answer is expected, in the second instance learners express an opinion, belief, or any other type of affective response. In addition, according to what learners can do with the input, activities can be classified as binary options, matching, supplying information, surveys, ordering, or selecting alternatives. We might therefore classify our sample activity as a binary option activity since both parts of the activity (choose between David Letterman or Madonna and agree or disagree) require the learner to indicate a correct answer and express his/her opinion out of two possible options.

Lastly, VanPatten (1996) presents some guidelines for developing structured input activities:

- Present one thing at a time.
- Keep meaning in focus.
- Move from sentences to connected discourse.
- Use both oral and written input.
- Have the learner do something with the input.
- Keep the learner's processing strategies in mind.

INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS OF PI

In a debate over the relative effectiveness of PI, there is a need to review the critiques pointed out by the research completed to date as well as to reflect on the extent to which such critiques may affect PI implementation in the SL classroom.

The first and undoubtedly most controversial issue about PI is its underlying theoretical premises. Recall from the previous section the model of acquisition of a second language. According to such model, while input is defined as the driving force of SLA, output promotes fluency and accuracy development. Nonetheless, such approach to acquisition does not exclude output practice in the SL classroom, since, as repeatedly mentioned by VanPatten and colleagues: «a coherent grammar lesson is one that takes the student from processing a grammatical feature in the input to accessing the feature from her developing system to create output» (Lee, VanPatten 2003, p. 181).

However, since PI was first proposed in an academic forum (VanPatten, Cadierino 1993), a considerable body of research has questioned its underlying acquisition model. The effects of PI have been compared to those of meaningful output-based instruction revealing superior results for the latter approach.¹ Such results have led scholars to question the roles assigned to input and output in the theoretical model underlying PI and to claim a facilitative role for output in altering the nature of the learner's developing system.

While there is a considerable amount of evidence supporting a role for production practice in developing the learner's implicit grammar, a role for input in SLA is entirely unquestionable. In this respect, PI emerges as an excellent resource to make the most of such input exposure, especially when it comes to addressing certain processing problems. Therefore, we do not see how this controversy could prevent us from implementing PI in the SL classroom.

Second, the degree of formal explicitness found in PI is another issue that has led some scholars to question its quality of focus on form approach:

[...] it is possible that the processing instruction is close to, if not over, the form-formS limit because of the level of explicit expression of formal features that precedes input processing. (Doughty, William 1998, p. 240)

Recall from the previous section the three basic components of PI. Students are presented with structured input activities, but they are also informed about the target structure and a particular processing problem. Undoubtedly, PI regards metalinguistic reflection in its overall framework. Nonetheless, such a reflection is always brief and motivated by a potential difficulty and by a communicative function. Such a metalinguistic reflection is not an aim of study in itself, i.e. the fundamental premise underlying FonF is never ignored: grammar at the service of communication. As seen previously, the first and more theoretical FonF definition claims an occasional attention to form to solve a communicative breakdown by means of quite implicit procedures. PI offers quite an explicit treatment, still it differs from focus on formS instruction since it primarily addresses learning

¹ See Morgan-Short and Wood Bowden (2006) for a literature review over the effectiveness of PI.

difficulties and it does not follow a curriculum of grammatical structures in isolation.

Also, the most restricted view of FonF may not always be enough. We agree with Lightbown (1998) when she says that raised eyebrows or hand signals might not be enough for the learner to reflect on the accuracy of what he/she has just said. In addition, there are some features of the target language that are very difficult (or maybe impossible) to be acquired through such procedures. Therefore, and considering this background, we agree once again on the effectiveness of IP to carry out the teaching of grammatical contents in the SL classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has sought to present a rationale for the implementation of grammar instruction in the second language classroom. While most would agree on communicative competence as the aim of learning a second language and therefore would suggest a communicative language teaching approach, an occasional attention to form has proven effective and is supported by language learning theory. In this sense, a *focus on form* approach has been suggested to accommodate an occasional attention to form within a communicatively oriented teaching framework. However, such an approach should be conveyed in terms of a pedagogical grammar.

We have presented the reader with *Processing Instruction* as an option to focus the learner's attention to form while processing input for meaning. Despite critiques concerning the underlying acquisition model and its explicit teaching nature, a considerable body of research has demonstrated its teaching effectiveness in different languages and with different structures. (See footnote 1, page 105).

In addition to its teaching effectiveness, other reasons to consider *Processing Instruction* as a grammar teaching strategy include its possibility of easy adaptation to different working environments other than the classroom, such as online programs. This asset makes *Processing Instruction* especially valuable in situations where class time is limited, since in such cases, students' work through online programs outside of the classroom allows them to devote class time to output practice tasks (VanPatten 1996, p. 158):

Can and should processing instruction occur outside of the classroom, say, as homework? Does it need to be brought into the classroom? Because processing instruction is input-based, can computers deliver effective processing instruction? Pursuing questions such as these will help instructors and curriculum developers maximize communicative language use during the rather minimum amount of time that language students spend in the classroom.

Finally, another potential advantage of *Processing Instruction* lies in the time it allots learners to process a certain grammatical item before asking them to produce it, i.e., it provides them with time to build up the confidence sometimes necessary to carry out an output task.

In summary, given the instructional validity of *Processing Instruction* as shown by research and theory to date, we encourage teachers to consider its implementation to approach grammatical instruction in the SL classroom.

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