

# **The power of strategic competence and the need for a focus on form.**

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**Mark Koprowski**

**The American School in Switzerland**

## ***1. Introduction***

The role of grammar instruction in SLA has had a rather disconcerting, exhausting and theoretically elusive time. A series of methods and procedures, a few espousing fantastic claims, have come and gone leaving some teachers understandably confused and pedagogically frustrated in the wake of conflicting theory and research. Even to this day, applied linguists such as Krashen defend the ‘zero position’. This is the claim that learners will acquire grammatical competence without explicit attention to form providing there is sufficient access to comprehensible input (Ellis, 1997: 43).

This naturalistic approach has been extremely influential in supporting communicative, content-based and task-based instructional programs where the major emphasis is on interaction and language *use*, rather than knowledge *about* language. It has also been claimed that when learners are given opportunities to engage in meaningful tasks, they will be naturally compelled to ‘negotiate for meaning’. In other words, they will adjust their language in a manner which leads to mutual understanding. This negotiation will, in theory, allow learners to acquire the words and grammatical structures of the language (Lightbrown and Spada, 1999).

In preparing learners to handle authentic communication situations, such meaning-based approaches have much to recommend them and, unlike traditional grammar-based approaches, they appear to be more congruent with current SLA theory. But while it is no secret that learners develop confidence, fluency, and impressive comprehension skills, there is growing evidence now that reveals at least one significant flaw: naturalistic learners do *not* readily acquire very high levels of grammatical competence (see Ellis, 1997: 52; Lightbrown and Spada, 1999: 134). This is a serious shortcoming. If we agree that the central aim of teaching is to develop

communicative competence in learners; that is, a healthy balance of sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic *and* grammatical competence (Canale, 1983: 18), then we must recognise that naturalistic approaches fall short of the mark.

In this essay, I discuss how naturalistic learners are able to develop communication strategies which allow them to successfully convey and interpret meaning without having to access their grammatical systems. I argue that a focus on form is therefore necessary to redress the balance.

What this paper will *not* attempt to do, however, is explore the methodological options for achieving this end.

## ***2. The Role of Strategic Competence***

Real time interaction is a cognitively and linguistically demanding task. Participants have to deal with multiple things during the process of coding and decoding messages. Even for native speakers, the process of forming thoughts and ideas and expressing them coherently through language is not a simple endeavour. Given this, one can easily understand how much more taxing this process is for learners who have to draw upon an underdeveloped interlanguage system (Bygate, 1987 in Skehan, 1995: 102).

### ***2.1 Communication strategies***

To offset this handicap, learners may tap their strategic competence to employ any number of strategies to participate in communication. This includes such well-known and straightforward strategies as avoidance, message adjustment, clarification requests, confirmation checks, mime, appeals for help and so on.

This essay will largely concern itself with those strategies that have traditionally received little attention, but which serve a more pervasive and even insidious role.

They are as follows:

1. Learners say only what is necessary to achieve meaning.
2. Learners process meaning before processing it for form.
3. Learners prefer using memory-based language to rule-based language.
4. Learners use schematic and contextual knowledge before grammatical knowledge to achieve meaning.

As we shall see, the theoretical dilemma is that learners are able to exploit these techniques and resources to comprehend and produce language independent of grammatical processing.

### ***3. Strategy #1 Learners say only what is necessary to achieve meaning.***

#### ***3.1 The case against Pushed Output***

One of the main theoretical tenets supporting naturalistic and task-based learning is the Pushed Output Hypothesis. This is the claim that when learners push their linguistic knowledge to the limit during meaningful interaction, acquisition takes place (Swain, 1985 in Ellis, 1997; 49). But to what extent can teachers bank on this phenomenon? A close look at task-based classroom language may provide some useful insights.

Seedhouse (1999), apparently sceptical of the theories supporting task-based learning, examined a number of classroom extracts to determine first hand the kinds of language students used when doing tasks. He first observed that some task objectives tended to severely limit the range of linguistic forms necessary to do the task. He further discovered that there was a general tendency to minimise; that is, learners produced only the amount of language necessary to get the task done. Moreover, the turns tended to be short and so syntactically sparse that the language resembled a pidgin. He points out: ‘the learners appear to be so concentrated on completing the task that linguistic forms are treated as a vehicle of minor importance’ (1999: 154).

While Seedhouse recognises that, according to theory, learners need to stretch their linguistic knowledge to the limit in order to acquire, he concludes that, in tasks, it is more likely that just the reverse happens.

#### ***3.2 The path of least resistance***

Willis (1990: 60) appears to lend support to these findings. He explains that new learners are primarily concerned with some kind of ‘functional adequacy’; that what is important to them is simply getting the meaning across. Moreover, learners have no real need to be formally accurate or careful with their language if they are set only pragmatic ends. This seems to be a highly reasonable claim. Moreover, Swain notes that content-based students are rarely required by their teachers to be accurate in the

second language, but when they *do* communicate, they are generally successful despite many grammatical errors (1985 in Lightbrown and Spada: 131).

Learners realise that language production, let alone accuracy, takes real work and, unless there is a precedence to be prolific or correct, they will choose the most efficient means possible for communication. As Skehan points out, learners value fluent discourse, not accuracy or the ‘usefulness’ of their language for interlanguage development (Skehan, 1998: 26-27). Considering these points, it is no wonder that learners take the path of least resistance.

### ***3.3 The Unreliability of Negotiation of Meaning***

This tendency to economise language use has led Foster (1998) to doubt another theoretical staple supporting task-based learning: the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis. According to this claim, acquisition will be facilitated if learners make adjustments to their language (i.e. negotiate for meaning) so that it is comprehensible for their interlocutor (Swain, 1985 in Foster, 1998: 17).

During a series of tasks, Foster measured the number of negotiation moves learners made. Despite the number of communication breakdowns that occurred, she discovered that learners in large part *did not even bother* to negotiate for meaning.

She accounts for this phenomenon by suggesting that when a breakdown occurs, learners may blame their interlocutor for the problem and therefore may not feel personally responsible to make repairs. Furthermore, she suggested that learners may take a ‘pretend and hope’ strategy. In other words, when met with a gap in understanding, learners may fake comprehension and hope that a future utterance clears things up. Foster notes that this strategy usually works (Foster, 1998). It also appears to be what most native speakers do (Skehan, 1998: 14).

In Foster’s study, of the few interaction modifications learners did make, by far the most common were lexical, not *syntactic*. For interlanguage development to take place, according to theory, learners must manipulate the *syntax* to make it comprehensible (Swain, 1985 in Foster, 1998: 17). Clearly, this may not be what happens. The evidence here suggests that learners may generally avoid negotiation, but when it does happen, the adjustment is likely to be semantic in nature. This appears to be consistent with the economising tendency of learners.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

We have been able to catch a glimpse of the kind of language students use when performing tasks. The theoretical assumptions that underlie task-based interaction suggest that Pushed Output and Comprehensible Output will somehow trigger acquisitional processes. Conversely, we have seen that learners do not appear to theoretically cooperate; that the language used for task completion tends to be lexically biased, brief and syntactically sparse. Moreover, negotiation of meaning, if it happens at all, favours lexical, not grammatical adjustment; the kind allegedly required for acquisition. These economising strategies suggest that learners operate on what Skehan calls a 'least effort' principle. Learners (like native speakers) say only what is necessary for communication to proceed. 'There is no obligation to be comprehensive or grammatical, only effective' (1994: 179). This trend appears to greatly undermine the very value of language output for acquisition.

### **4. Strategy #2 *Learners process meaning before processing it for form.***

In traditional comprehension-based approaches (e.g. The Natural Approach, content-based instruction), it is assumed that roughly tuned input, providing it is comprehensible, allows learners to automatically acquire the next grammatical feature in their acquisition order (the Input Hypothesis). From a psycholinguistic perspective, this now appears to be naïve.

The processes at work inside a language user's mind during the time of comprehension is more complex than what researchers may have traditionally assumed. VanPatten explains that comprehension actually requires *work*. Because of limited attention, learners simply cannot process all the input they are exposed to. Rather, language users consciously focus on particular features. That is, learners deliberately *choose* what gets processed and what does not during comprehension. And it is this input which makes its way into the internal system as intake (VanPatten, 1996: 7). What is of particular interest for the purpose of this essay is *what* learners *choose* to process.

#### **4.1 Communicative Value**

According to VanPatten, given the limits of working memory, learners will tend to give processing priority to language which has the most communicative value. Often these are lexical words since language learners are intuitively aware that these items carry the most meaning. In a sense, form and meaning *compete* for attention and it is *meaning* that generally prevails.<sup>1</sup> The communicative goal of the learner is primarily to understand messages, therefore learners will process input for meaning before processing it for form. This makes sense. Given the processing constraints of real-time communication, learners are quick to look for the message in the input (“What is this person saying to me?”) *before* considering how that message is encoded (VanPatten, 1996: 17).

Even Krashen appears to share this viewpoint to some extent. He claims that certain morphological features in the input may be completely ignored by early learners (either consciously or unconsciously) because they are not necessary for understanding (Krashen, 1983 in Lewis, 1993: 24). This position is summed up nicely by Cook: the ability to ‘decode’ language may not be the same thing as ‘code breaking’ (Cook, 1991 in Swain, 1996: 129). That is, understanding messages is not the same thing as deciphering the grammatical forms for meaning.

VanPatten notes that as learners progress, they eventually become more sensitive and automatic in the processing of meaning. They will eventually be able to allocate more attention to processing input which has less communicative value (1996: 31).

#### **4.2 Conclusion**

In summary, processing language in real time is a cognitively demanding endeavour. Learners will tend to process what is communicatively valuable and not hold into working memory information that is not. Lexical words take priority and grammatical words may get processed only if there is attention to spare (VanPatten, 1996: 27). This raises serious theoretical and pedagogic concerns for the naturalistic classroom. Unless grammatical features in the input *do* get processed (something which apparently

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<sup>1</sup> By form, VanPatten (1996: 18) means morphology, prepositions, articles, pronouns and other grammar words.

happens less frequently than thought), they will not enter into the developing system as intake. As Skehan poignantly notes, 'effective comprehension may leave the underlying interlanguage system untouched and unscathed' (1998:15). This notion may evoke serious damage to the assertion that gains achieved in comprehending input make the transfer to interlanguage and then production (Swain, 1985 in Skehan, 1994: 76).

### **5. Strategy #3 *Learners prefer using memory-based language to rule-based language.***

The traditional structuralist school of linguistics conceived language production as stemming from a set of internalised grammar rules. They claimed that if learners could just master the underlying grammar rules of the system, they could produce correct sentences (Lewis, 1993). Developments in SLA research now suggest that this may not be the case. Language users do not always produce original language. In reality, language users carry in memory a vast store (it is claimed hundreds of thousands) of pre-fabricated language consisting of multi-word lexical items or 'chunks' (Pawley and Syder, 1983; Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992). Consider these examples:

*I see what you mean.*  
*Make yourself at home.*  
*How do you do.*  
*Piece of cake!*  
*Not to my knowledge.*  
*If I were you, I'd . . .*

It is clear that these expressions are not usually *grammaticalised*. That is, they are not generated by the rules governing syntax. Rather, chunks of this sort are memorised as wholes and effortlessly accessed to deal with common and familiar situations fluently (Pawley and Syder, 1983: 209). Moreover, as lexical phrases represent conventional and frequent utterances, they are immediately identifiable and therefore ease the processing burden for both speaker *and* listener (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992: 19). In short, decoding lexical chunks is much like decoding words. The processing work consists of 'cognitive matching', whereby a lexical unit in the input is matched against the *same* lexical unit in the listener's mental lexicon. Meaning is achieved instantly. There is no tedious or detailed syntactic analysis.

#### **5.1 *The value of communicating lexically***

The advantage learners have in using lexical chunks is multi-fold. Most researchers agree that learners use a large number of them because they satisfy a real social need. They allow learners to convey expressions which they are not yet able to construct from rules. The unanalysed chunks can be stored in memory as wholes and then used where situations demand (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992: 26-27). Learners not only develop fluency in this way but achieve pragmatic competence and accuracy since lexical chunks are, by definition, grammatically correct (Nyssonen, 1995: 166). Clearly, efficiency of learning is maximised.

Skehan, in *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*, suggests that 'it is natural to communicate by lexical means, and we only relinquish this preferred mode if we have to' (1998: 33). During spontaneous speech, language users are more apt to choose accessibility (the quick recall of language from memory) to creating language anew from a rule-based system (a potentially slow and laborious process). Given these communicative benefits, it is not surprising that memory is preferred.

## 5.2 The value of rule-based system

However, neither the rule-based or memory-based system alone is adequate without the other. As the study of grammar have always recognised, the analytic-based system is essential because it is generative. It is needed for the construction (and analysis) of creative and precise language, to handle unique and unfamiliar situations, and when pre-fabricated language just will not fit. New ideas and things which have not been expressed before can be said. Language of this kind simply cannot be generated without a rule-based system (Lewis, 1993: 41-42).

Even more importantly, perhaps, with a rule-based system, language learners can choose to produce new or idiolectal expressions and memorise them as pre-fabricated chunks for future use (Skehan, 1998: 60).

## 5.3 Conclusion

Much of the language we encounter on a day-to-day basis may derive direct from memory and not engineered from an analytic system. But both language resources are indeed necessary to be a fully competent language user. The learning and use of pre-fabricated language can serve as a useful and attractive communication strategy to exploit but when the pressures of real-time communication is a factor, a lexical mode of communication will predominate (Skehan, 1995: 100). But this natural inclination may lead to a lack of necessary grammatical knowledge needed to compose and decompose language (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992).

## 6. Strategy # 4 Learners use schematic and contextual knowledge before grammatical knowledge to achieve meaning.

In addition to the strategies explored so far, language users have access to other knowledge sources which can also be easily exploited to achieve meaning independent of a grammatical system. These are schematic and contextual knowledge (Anderson and Lynch, 1988: 13 in Skehan, 1998: 15; Widdowson, 1990).

### 6.1 Schematic knowledge

Schematic knowledge refers to the language user's previous experiences and memories which help to make sense of new experiences. This knowledge base can be brought to the task of interpreting and comprehending input. As Nunan observes, within a classroom context, 'meaning does not reside exclusively within the words on the tape recorder or on the page' (Nunan, 1991: 18). Meaning is also in the learner's mind. In fact, language learners might be able to very effectively guess the meaning of messages if they can just connect what is being said to prior knowledge (Skehan, 1998: 15).

### 6.2 Contextual knowledge

Contextual knowledge, on the other hand, refers to clues in the environment which point to meaning. Widdowson demonstrates how powerful context can be in providing semantic information.

In an extreme, but effective example, we hear:

Scalpel! Swab! Clamp!

Clearly, these are the words uttered by a surgeon in mid-operation. But there is no grammar, no sentence—only words. The words alone, with the help of situational clues, create the meaning of 'hand me x'; x being a surgical implement. In fact, Widdowson goes on to suggest that adding grammar to the message would be not only redundant but dangerous! He states: 'By the time the surgeon had produced his complete sentence, the patient might well have bled to death: a victim of syntax' (Widdowson, 1990: 82-83).

Given the situational context (e.g. a bus queue, a dinner party, the meeting of new people), we have a pretty good idea of the probable things people are likely to say. People with many similar or shared experiences and knowledge can manage to communicate with only minimal use of their linguistic knowledge (Widdowson, 1990: 102) By accessing contextual knowledge, we can narrow down the range of potential meanings and therefore our guesses are more apt to be correct (Skehan, 1998: 15.) The need for grammar usually enters the picture when we are faced with the task of achieving meaning in the absence of context (Widdowson, 1990: 102).

### 6.3 Shortcuts to meaning

Widdowson recognises a serious problem regarding schematic and contextual knowledge:

Meaning negotiation... will be carried out by taking whatever shortcuts are available. It does not in itself provide conditions for the acquisition of a systemic knowledge of the foreign language. (1990:111)

That is, learners can often achieve meaning without having to rely purely on syntax. Instead, language users tend to follow the principle of 'communicative economy'. Users pay attention to input only to the extent required to make connections with context and schema (Widdowson, 1990).

The schematic and contextual shortcuts so far discussed relate to comprehension. However, Skehan notes that access to contextual and schematic knowledge is equally advantageous in the case of production. The speaker usually plans what is said with the contextual and schematic knowledge of the listener in mind (Skehan, 1998: 26). In the 'Scalpel! Swab! Clamp!' example, the shared schematic and contextual knowledge of the surgical team informs the surgeon that certain one-word utterances will be clearly and immediately understood. Seedhouse confirms this finding. In the interactions of task-based classrooms, he notes that contextual clues inherent in the task make it unnecessary for learners to grammaticalise or say much to achieve meaning (Seedhouse, 1999: 153).

#### 6.4 Schematic deprivation: a solution?

As learners tend to naturally defer to schematic knowledge when confronted with new information, Widdowson proposes a counter-strategy. He suggests that teachers deliberately deprive their students of schematic knowledge by giving them obscure texts to puzzle through (1990: 106). In theory, this would effectively road-block at least one potential shortcut and learners would have no choice but to access their analytic systems to decode unfamiliar content.

Appealing in theory, the idea in practice may likely hit a motivational snag among learners. Learners want and expect to read interesting things in class, not be forced into reading obscure and tedious discourse. Moreover, is it realistic for teachers to be so perfectly acquainted with the experiences of students (a frightening thought) to be confident enough to pick out appropriate reading texts? How far does a teacher need to dig to find 'schema-proof' materials? (Perhaps this essay may suffice.)

Widdowson's tactic is obviously theoretical but he at least recognises a genuine problem and offers a potential, if somewhat improbable, solution. In any event, if learners are successfully denied access to schematic knowledge, I highly suspect that they will manage to enlist other strategic means to compensate. But the answer surely cannot be to blind students schematically.

#### 6.5 Conclusion

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<sup>2</sup> Widdowson's example involves a text which intricately describes how oil-bound paints sometimes fail on certain building materials (1990: 107).

Access to schematic and contextual knowledge is perhaps one of the most powerful and useful resources learners have at their disposal in achieving probable meaning. However, the price is high. Shortcuts to meaning leave the learner's analytic system idle but it difficult if not impossible to simply deny learners access to background or contextual knowledge in the course of communication. Like other strategies, they serve a commanding resource in the strategic tool kit of learners. But it must be recognised that they present a threat to the development of grammatical competence.

## 7. A communicative crutch

Littlewood recognises the tremendous value of communication strategies by stating:

A second language learner who is skilled in this domain may communicate more effectively than learners who are considerably more advanced in purely linguistic terms. (1984: 86-87, emphasis added)

Considering the variety and efficacy of available strategies and resources, this claim is hardly contentious. In fact, Littlewood's remark implies that such communicative crutches, when used in combination, can successfully compensate for a deficient linguistic system. In other words, language users can bypass their syntactic operating systems and still remain effective communicators. As a result, learners develop a disproportionately large strategic competence (Ellis, 1997:52). Strategic competence flourishes at the considerable expense of grammatical competence.\_

### 7.1 The strategising problem

Skehan is well aware of the problem. The target language grammar is not necessary for much communication. He states: 'the engagement of grammatical processes gets 'unhooked' from communication, because other resources and strategies... have a more direct pay-off' (1994: 100). Ellis appears to agree. He suggests that learners are faced with two distinct processing options: the choice of strategising to achieve communicative efficiency or the choice to acquire. The limits of attention do not permit both. Learners can choose either options but 'one suffers at the expense of the other' (Ellis, 1997: 131). Willing captures the dilemma quite succinctly: 'it is reasonable to hold that the learner cannot learn when actually involved in a communicative event: [they are] too busy communicating (1989).

There is of course theoretical irony in this. Naturalistic language programs (highly endorsed and celebrated by some theorists as the way to acquisition) encourage natural strategy use which effectively subverts the acquisition process.

### 7.2 The need for a focus on form

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, I tentatively hypothesise that there exists an inversely proportionate relationship between grammatical and strategic competence, but this claim will not be examined here.

While traditional form-focussed classrooms have often been disparaged for developing grammatical competence at the expense of real communication skills, meaning-based approaches appear to commit a similar pedagogic sin. Strategic competence is developed at the expense of grammar (Ellis, 1997:52). Clearly, each approach alone does not provide all of the conditions needed for communicative competence. The aim, therefore, may be to capture the best possible features of both while avoiding their pedagogic extremes (Lightbrown and Spada, 1999: 153). Such an approach would incorporate natural language exposure and use but be balanced with explicit attention to form. A number of experiments optimistically demonstrate that this indeed works; that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback in the communicative language learning classroom can improve the learners' linguistic accuracy (see studies in Lightbrown and Spada, 1999: 134-149). While a focus on form offers a sensible balance to naturalistic learning programs, explicit grammar instruction may be good thing for other reasons as well:

- ( Older learners who have studied under traditional methods may strongly expect explicit grammar instruction. (Yorio, 1986 in Lightbrown and Spada, 1999: 59).
- ( Some learners need excessive attention to accuracy for the purpose of examinations or employment (Swan, 1998: 5).
- It may help prevent fossilisation (Long and Robinson, 1998: 21) and errors of omission (Skehan, 1994: 188-89).
- ( It is indispensable for accurate writing, the employment of a formal register and other skills (Celce-Murcia, 1985:4 in Stern, 1992: 133).
- It may speed up learning along the acquisition order (Long and Robinson, 1998: 21).
- Some 'analytic' and 'authority-oriented' learners prefer it (Willing, 1988 in Nunan, 1991: 170).

## 9. Conclusion

Language acquisition theories often rest on questionable assumptions about how learners will behave in the classroom. Zero position theorists such as Krashen trust that learners will acquire the grammar of the language by comprehending linguistic forms or by happily engaging in negotiation of meaning. But, as we have seen, learners do not simply play along. They follow their own agenda.

In reality, learners do all they can to reduce the processing burdens of authentic communication while maintaining meaningful interchange. Like native speakers, this is successfully accomplished by relying on schematic knowledge and contextual clues; drawing on memory-based language for fluency; quickly distilling probable meaning from input; and uttering only what is needed to convey messages. All of these strategies add up to allow the learner to effectively participate in communication. But as evidenced, the learners analytic system is bypassed much of the time. It would appear that the strategising processes employed in communication do not naturally complement the

processes of grammar acquisition. Consequently, a grammatical competence, essential for full communicative competence, suffers.

To offset the linguistic consequences of these natural strategies, a focus on form is highly desirable since it is unlikely that full system development will take place on its own accord. If the ultimate goal in second language learning is communicative competence, then attention to form will need to play an integral role to ensure a healthy balance of discourse, strategic, sociolinguistic and grammatical competence.

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