

Principles of Instructed Language Learning

Rod Ellis

University of Auckland

Principles and options

Long (2008) distinguished:

1. Principles – ‘language teaching universals’
2. Options – ‘a potentially infinite range of options for instantiating the principles at the classroom level’

Principle 1

Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.

Formulaic Expressions

“A language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analyzable into segments. To some extent this may reflect the recurrence of similar situations in human affairs; it may illustrate a natural tendency to economy of effort; or it may be motivated in part by the exigencies of real-time conversation”.

(Sinclair, 1991)

Formulaic Expressions

- Necessary for fluency (Skehan)
- Native speakers use a wide range of formulaic expressions (Foster 2001)
- Classroom studies show that learners often internalize rote-learned material as chunks
- Functional syllabuses can serve as a basis for teaching formulaic chunks
- Learners may develop 'rules' through analyzing memorized chunks.

Rule-Based Competence

- Traditionally catered for through a focus-on-forms approach but this may result in learners learning rote-memorized patterns.
- Teaching of grammar can be profitably delayed until later. Language learning begins with words and formulaic expressions.

Principle 2:

Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning

Two senses of 'focus on meaning'

1. Semantic meaning (i.e. the meanings of different lexical items or of specific grammatical structures).
2. Pragmatic meaning (i.e. highly contextualized meanings that arise in acts of communication).

Both types of meaning are important but central to L2 acquisition is a focus on pragmatic meaning.

Reasons for Focussing on Pragmatic meaning

1. When learners are engaged in decoding and encoding messages in the context of actual acts of communication the conditions are created for acquisition to take place (cf. immersion programmes).
2. To develop true fluency in an L2, learners must have opportunities to create pragmatic meaning (DeKeyser 1998).
3. Engaging learners in activities where they are focused on creating pragmatic meaning is intrinsically motivating.

Principle 3:

Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form.

The importance of 'attention'

Strong view – no attention to form, no learning.

Weak view – learning is facilitated by attention to form.

Different senses of attending to form:

1. A general orientation to language as form as opposed to attention to specific linguistic forms in the input.
2. Attention to graphic or phonetic instantiations of linguistic forms as opposed to attention to form-function mappings.
3. Attention as awareness of some underlying abstract rule vs. attention as noticing of specific linguistic items.

How instruction can cater to a focus on form

1. Through grammar lessons designed to teach specific grammatical features
2. Through focused tasks(i.e. tasks that require learners to comprehend and process specific grammatical structures in the input, and/or to produce the structures in the performance of the task).
3. By means of methodological options that induce attention to form in the context of performing a task (e.g. the provision of time for strategic and on-line planning (Foster and Skehan 1996) and corrective feedback (Lyster 2004).

Two Types of Focus-on-Form Instruction

1. Intensive (pre-selected linguistic forms)
2. Extensive (incidental attention to form through corrective feedback)

Principle 4:

Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the L2 while not neglecting explicit knowledge.

Implicit Knowledge

- Procedural (not symbolic)
- Accessed by means of automatic processes
- Unconscious
- Not verbalizable

Note: The main goal of teaching an L2 should be to develop implicit knowledge.

Explicit Knowledge

- Declarative (i.e. 'facts' about language)
- Symbolic
- Accessed through controlled processing
- Conscious
- Verbalizable (metalanguage)

Developing implicit knowledge

Three views of how it can be developed:

1. Non- interface hypothesis (Krashen)
2. Interface hypothesis (DeKeyser)
3. Weak interface position (Ellis)

But all theories acknowledge the need to engage learners in communicative activity (via task-based or task-supported teaching) in order to develop implicit knowledge.

The role of explicit knowledge

Two possible roles:

1. As an initial starting point for the development of implicit knowledge.
Explicit knowledge → implicit knowledge
2. As a means of developing awareness of what needs to be learned and thus facilitating the processes involved in developing implicit knowledge.

The role of consciousness-raising tasks.

Principle 5:

Instruction needs to take into account the learner's 'built-in-syllabus'.

Two aspects of the 'built-in syllabus'

1. Order of acquisition (morpheme studies)
2. Sequence of acquisition (studies of transitional structures such as negatives and interrogatives)

The effect of instruction on the 'built-in syllabus'

Three groups of studies:

- Studies that compared the order of acquisition of instructed and naturalistic learners (e.g. Pica 1983).
- Studies comparing the success of instructed and naturalistic learners (e.g. Long 1983).
- Studies investigating whether teaching specific structures results in their acquisition (e.g. Pienemann 1989).

General conclusion – instruction works but only if it is compatible with natural processes of acquisition.

Ways of accommodating instruction to the 'built-in syllabus'

1. The zero grammar approach (i.e. adopt a task-based approach).
2. Teach grammatical structures that learners are ready to acquire.
3. Teach explicit rather than implicit knowledge – explicit knowledge is not subject to the same developmental constraints.

Principle 6:

Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input.

Comprehensible Input

Krashen – input must be comprehensible to work for acquisition:

- Simplified input
- Contextualized input

Amount and quality of input accounts for rate of acquisition.

But comprehensible input may not be sufficient to ensure native-like competence.

Strategies for giving learners access to extensive input

1. Maximise use of the L2 inside the classroom – use L2 for classroom management and organisation.
2. Create opportunities for students to receive input outside the classroom – through extensive reading programmes, self-access centres and learner–training.

Principle 7:
Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output.

How output can contribute to L2 acquisition (Skehan; Ellis)

- Through corrective feedback when learners make errors in
- It forces syntactic processing (i.e. obliges learners to pay attention to grammar);
- It helps to automatize existing knowledge;
- It provides opportunities for learners to develop discourse skills, for example by producing 'long turns';
- It provides the learner with 'auto-input' (i.e. learners can attend to the 'input' provided by their own productions).

The importance of 'pushed output' (Swain)

Little pushed output in classrooms where there is an emphasis on:

- Controlled practice exercises
- Few opportunities for extended talk

Task-based language teaching and group work provide opportunities for pushed output.

Principle 8:

The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency.

The Role of Interaction in L2 Acquisition

‘One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of the interaction syntactic structures are developed’ (Hatch)

Interaction Hypothesis (Long): negotiating for meaning aids acquisition by:

- Making input comprehensible
- Providing corrective feedback
- Output modification

Sociocultural theory of mind (Lantolf) – scaffolding.

Key requirements for interaction to create an acquisition-rich classroom (Johnson)

1. Creating contexts of language use where students have a reason to attend to language
2. Providing opportunities for learners to use the language to express their own personal meanings
3. Helping students to participate in language-related activities that are beyond their current level of proficiency
4. Offering a full range of contexts that cater for a 'full performance' in the language.

Principle 9:

Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners.

Key individual difference factors

1. Language aptitude
2. Motivation (extrinsic vs. intrinsic)
3. Language anxiety
4. Learning strategies

Language Aptitude

Learners have different types of language aptitude (e.g. analytical vs. memory-based).

Teachers can cater to variation in their students' aptitude by means of:

- Learner-instruction matching
- Using a variety of learning activities
- Providing learner training to encourage flexible learning approach (cf. good language learner studies)

Motivation

Teachers also need to accept that it is their responsibility to ensure that their students are motivated and stay motivated and not bewail the fact that students do not bring any motivation to learn the L2 to the classroom. While it is probably true that teachers can do little to influence students' extrinsic motivation, there is a lot they can do to enhance their intrinsic motivation.

Dornyei's strategies for developing learner motivation.

Principle 10

Instruction needs to take account of the fact that there is a subjective aspect to language learning

Personal identity

Learners have an opportunity to develop their subjective selves by taking on new identities and even a new personality (Kramsch, 2009).

Learning a language helps learners to examine the beliefs and practices of their own world view critically.

Dornyei's notion of the 'ideal L2 self'.

Principle 11:
In assessing learners' L2 proficiency it is important to examine free as well as controlled production.

Four Types of Measurement (Norris and Ortega)

1. metalinguistic judgement (e.g. a grammaticality judgment test)
2. selected response (e.g. multiple choice)
3. constrained constructed response (e.g. gap filling exercises)
4. free constructed response (e.g. a communicative task).

Magnitude of effect of instruction greatest in the case of (2) and (3) and least in (4). Yet, arguably, it is (4) that constitutes the best measure of learners' L2 proficiency

Using tasks to assess learners' free production

The performance elicited by means of tasks can be assessed in three ways:

(1) a direct assessment of task outcomes, (2) discourse analytic measures (3) external ratings.

(1) is the most practical method for the classroom teacher.

CONCLUSION

The value of the principles:

1. Provide a basis for evaluating different approaches to language teaching
2. As a basis for designing teacher education/ training programmes.

But the principles are only 'provisional specifications'.