

Focusing on Form in Language Instruction

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Overview

In this module you will explore the following topics:

- what mental representation is
- why input is critical for building mental representation
- why input isn't always enough
- pedagogical interventions that work with input to develop mental representation

Ever since the advent of communicative approaches to language curricula, many instructors have been perplexed about the role of traditional grammar instruction in and out of the classroom. By traditional grammar instruction, we mean explaining a grammar point followed by some kind of practice with the grammar rules or with grammatical forms such as verb and noun endings. However, when we use the term *grammar* in linguistics or second language acquisition (SLA), we are not referring to textbook rules, but to one's underlying mental representation or underlying knowledge of the L2—most of which has little to no resemblance to textbook rules and explanations. This representation develops implicitly in the mind of the learner over time after much exposure to input. At the same time, we also know that learners have difficulties with some formal elements of language, and might not reach native-like abilities or knowledge with these elements. We therefore need to ask the following questions: How can we enhance or give input a boost to help L2 learners acquire formal aspects of an L2 more quickly and efficiently? What pedagogical interventions may help learners work with input better?

A **pedagogical intervention** is a technique used to assist learners in the acquisition of formal properties of language. It is important to point out

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that such interventions are not methods of language instruction. Pedagogical interventions or techniques are used in conjunction with a method or approach. Several pedagogical interventions may be used in any given method or approach. Before discussing some of the pedagogical interventions that may help learners maximize the input they are exposed to, we will discuss what mental representation is, and why input is critical for its development.

Mental Representation and Input

Language development consists of two basic and independent phenomena: (1) the creation of a mental representation of language; and (2) the development of skill, or the ability to use language in real time for communicative purposes. This module focuses on the development of mental representation. In this discussion, we will borrow insights from the modules on the nature of language and the nature of communication and skill in this series (see suggested readings).

Mental Representation

Mental representation refers to our underlying knowledge of language. This knowledge is complex because it involves multiple components of language such as phonology, morphology, syntax, the lexicon, and pragmatics. This knowledge is also implicit and involves abstract representations. By implicit, we mean that a person usually cannot describe this knowledge, or at least not easily. For example, why do we have to delete “that” when making a question out of a statement as in “Carrie thinks that her colleague Samantha is sneaky” → “Who does Carrie think is sneaky?” Why is it not possible to say “Who does Carrie think that is sneaky?” People who are not trained linguists are usually not able to offer an explanation easily, but they know a question phrased this way is not possible.

What this example illustrates is that our mental representation or underlying knowledge of language is implicit and exists outside of consciousness. When we use language, we typically do not think about this representation. In most cases, we just speak or use language. This knowledge is implicit.

Reflection

Are there other examples of implicit knowledge that cannot be described or explained easily? What about implicit knowledge that is not language related?

It is widely accepted in linguistic and cognitive approaches to second language acquisition that two key ingredients are required for the acquisition of mental representation: (1) input; and (2) some kind of internal learning device. Although depictions of the internal learning device vary depending on the theoretical perspective, the role of input remains the same. Formal instruction cannot directly affect the workings of the internal learning device, but it may be possible for instruction to manipulate input in particular ways to aid acquisition. Therefore, instruction should ensure that learners have many opportunities to interact with input. It also follows that if input is the raw data for language acquisition, then any kind of pedagogical intervention to aid the acquisition of language should be input-oriented.

The pedagogical interventions presented in this module involve working with input in some way. Before discussing these interventions, we briefly review why input is important and discuss why input may not always be enough.

Why Input Is Important and Why It May Also Need Help

In order to create a mental representation of an L2, learners need input in that language. Input refers to language that a learner hears, reads, or sees (e.g., sign language) that has communicative intent. Language with communicative intent means that the input has a message that the learner is supposed to attend and respond to for its meaning. Input may come from a variety of sources such as newspapers, magazines, film, television, billboards, and so forth, including, of course, from other speakers. Language that instructors use in their classrooms with their students also qualifies as input for acquisition. When instructors say things like “Please open your books to page 256” or “You need to read the lesson before you come to class,” students get input that they must attend to for meaning and respond to in appropriate ways.

Input provides internal language learning mechanisms with data. This is why input is sometimes also referred to as **primary linguistic data**. When students hear, “You will meet two guest speakers and their husbands in class tomorrow,” they not only get information about who will be visiting their class, they are also exposed to data with grammatical properties (e.g., verbs in English must have subjects, the *-s* at the end of *speakers* and *husbands* denotes “more than one,” *will* expresses future time reference, and so on.). Internal learning mechanisms use these data to construct an implicit linguistic system, that is to say, a mental representation of that L2. In this way, input is critical for the development of mental representation.

To be clear, information about language (i.e., explanations about a grammatical phenomenon such as “verbs in Spanish must agree with their subjects” or “Japanese marks all nouns with case”) does not constitute

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the kind of input that feeds directly into mental representation because this language *describes* a particular grammatical form rather than being actual data for that form. Because the internal learning mechanisms are designed only to process raw linguistic data, they cannot transform information about language into this raw data. At the same time, however, this does not mean that information about language can never be useful—a point to be addressed later in this module.

The point to be underscored here is that input is essential for language development. However, it is important to point out that not all of the input that learners are exposed to is immediately usable for acquisition. The part of input that internal learning mechanisms are able to use to build mental representation is called **intake**. Intake is a subset of the input that learners are exposed to; it is input that has been filtered or extracted in some way to render it usable for acquisition. SLA, then, is directly dependent on intake and not on input since only intake data is directly usable for acquisition.

How do learners create intake from input? Although there is no debate that input is critical for SLA, there is less of a consensus regarding the nature of the mechanisms that are involved in the conversion of input to intake. In current linguistic and cognitive approaches to SLA, one widely accepted conceptualization of intake is that it is input that has been processed in some way as learners attempt to make **form-meaning connections** from input during the act of comprehension. A form-meaning connection is the relationship between referential meaning (i.e., real-world meaning) and the way it is encoded linguistically. For example, in English, past temporal reference may be encoded by the morphological ending *-ed*. When a learner hears in the input “I talked to my professor about my grade,” and understands that *talked* means the action occurred in the past, a form-meaning connection is made and intake is created. This intake in turn becomes usable by internal learning mechanisms to build mental representation. However, the fact that intake has been created does not mean that this data has been internalized and is automatically part of the learner’s mental representation. Intake has the potential to be internalized, but it is not synonymous with internalized language. For a variety of complex reasons, it may take a long time for some intake data to be internalized and there may be some aspects of intake that never become part of a learner’s mental representation.

To recap, whereas input constitutes all of the linguistic data that learners are exposed to in communicative settings, intake contains the parts of input that have actually been extracted or processed. Because only the parts of input that have been processed are usable data for constructing mental representation, not all of the input that learners are exposed to feeds into underlying knowledge. In fact, researchers have noted that learners often attempt to comprehend input using strategies that cause