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Structured Input Activities

WHAT IS STRUCTURED INPUT?

The word *structured* is a common everyday term. For example, we have probably heard people speak of their day as being “structured.” What does this mean? Does this mean that their day is haphazard or does it mean that they have a schedule that is organized and planned in some way? What about if they have a vacation that is structured? Does this mean that they just wake up everyday and go with the flow or would they have a carefully planned itinerary with specific activities to do each day? The typical meaning, of course, is that their days are planned and organized. But note something important about these terms, *structured*, “organized” and “planned” in our examples. These terms imply that the structure, plans or organization were imposed by someone, not that the person's day just happens to be structured. In order for our day or vacation to be structured, we must purposefully structure the day. Why would we want to do this? Most probably so that we could get certain things done or meet some goal. For example, in order for me to get this book done, I had to set up a structured schedule to help me meet my deadlines.

In the context of language acquisition, we may also speak of input as being structured. **Structured input** is input that has been structured to meet a particular goal. Lee and VanPatten (1995, 2003) call activities that use this type of input **structured input activities**. The goal of structured input activities is not just to get learners to notice target forms but to also alter any incorrect strategies they may be using to process input so that they can make form-meaning connections correctly and more efficiently. How do we do this?

How Are Structured Input Activities Carried Out?

Structured input activities are based on information about how learners make form-meaning connections. As you may recall from Chapter 3, this is also known as **input processing**. In order to change a faulty strategy, we

TABLE 6.1 Principles of VanPatten's Model of Input Processing

<p>Principle 1 (P1). The Primacy of Meaning Principle. Learners process input for meaning before they process it for form.</p> <p>P1a. The Primacy of Content Words Principle. Learners process content words in the input before anything else.</p> <p>P1b. The Lexical Preference Principle. Learners will tend to rely on lexical items as opposed to grammatical form to get meaning when both encode the same semantic information.</p> <p>P1c. The Preference for Nonredundancy Principle. Learners are more likely to process nonredundant meaningful grammatical form before they process redundant meaningful forms.</p> <p>P1d. The Meaning-before-Nonmeaning Principle. Learners are more likely to process nonredundant meaningful grammatical forms before nonmeaningful forms irrespective of redundancy.</p> <p>P1e. The Availability of Resources Principle. For learners to process either redundant meaningful grammatical forms or nonmeaningful forms, the processing or overall sentential meaning must not drain available processing resources.</p> <p>P1f. The Sentence Location Principle. Learners tend to process items in sentence initial position before those in final position and those in medial position.</p>
<p>Principle 2 (P2). The First Noun Principle. Learners tend to process the first noun or pronoun they encounter in a sentence as the subject or agent.</p> <p>P2a. The Lexical Semantics Principle. Learners may rely on lexical semantics, where possible, instead of word order to interpret sentences.</p> <p>P2b. The Event Probabilities Principle. Learners may rely on event probabilities, where possible, instead of word order to interpret sentences.</p> <p>P2c. The Contextual Constraint Principle. Learners may rely less on the First Noun Principle of preceding context constrains the possible interpretation of a clause or sentence.</p>

Source: Lee and VanPatten (2003)

must first understand what those less-than-optimal strategies are. Imagine that you are sick and you go to the doctor for medicine. Before the doctor can give you medicine to help you feel better, she needs to first find out what is wrong. The same goes for structured input activities. Before we can create an activity to remedy a particular processing problem, we first need to understand why the learner has difficulty making a particular form-meaning connection.

How do we find out this information? A lot of research has been conducted to find out what strategies learners use to pay attention to input and why. You will find a list of this research at the end of this chapter. This body of research led VanPatten to formulate what is known as a model of input processing. VanPatten's model contains a set of principles and subprinciples to describe the strategies that learners use to make form-meaning connections from input (see Table 6.1). This model serves as a guide to assist in the creation of structured input activities.

Strategies Learners Use to Process Input

The first principle and subprinciples of the model are based on an understanding that learners are driven to get meaning from the input. What this means is that when learners hear a piece of input, they first try to understand the message the input conveys before paying attention to how that message is encoded linguistically. This is what VanPatten means when he says that learners will process input for meaning before form. He means that more meaningful items in the input will get processed before less meaningful ones. What are the more meaningful items in input? Content words. Content words are things in the input that carry the most meaning. For example, in the sentence *The apples are in the basket* which words are content words? If you said *apples* and *basket* you are correct. Content words are big words that have concrete meaning. Other examples of content words are *cat, dog, run, ball, Jane, she*. Subprinciple P1a states that content words are probably the first things that learners process. The subprinciples go on to explain that if a lexical item and a grammatical form both encode the same semantic information (or meaning), the learner will process the lexical item before the grammatical form (see P1b). What is a lexical item? A lexical item is any free standing unit of meaning. For example, *cat* can stand alone and means "feline." The *-s* of *cats* means "more than one" but cannot stand alone. *Cat* is a lexical item, *-s* is not. Thus, we can say that content words (e.g., *cat*) are also lexical items. However, not all lexical items are content words. The definite article *the* is a lexical item indicating "definiteness, a particular one" but it is not a content word like *cat*. *Cat* is a content lexical item, *the* is not. Note the difference: *The cat is on the mat.* vs. *Cat on mat.* vs. *The on mat.* Which of the latter two sentences is most likely to be interpreted first?

Let's try another example. Consider the following sentence:

Last night Ann watched TV.

If learners wanted to determine the temporal reference or tense of this sentence, which element in that sentence would they pay attention to first according to Principle 1? If you said *last night* you are correct. The words *last night* are content lexical items that tell us that the action took place in the past. What else in that sentence tells us that the action took place in the past? If you said the *-ed* on the end of the verb *watch*, you are right again. *-ed* is a morphological form that also expresses pastness. However, when learners are confronted with the above sentence, they would most likely pay attention or process the content lexical items *last night* before the morphological form *-ed* in the verb *watch* because the content lexical items carry more meaning.

Pause to consider . . .

what learners process in input. Which items do you think learners will notice and process first in the following sentences? Which items might they skip over?

1. My cat killed a squirrel yesterday.
2. There are some sodas on the counter in the kitchen.
3. Moths like to hide in dark places like my closet.

An important construct for understanding the first principle of VanPatten's model is the idea of communicative value. In Chapter 5 when we talked about Shook's textual enhancement study, we said that communicative value refers to the meaning that a form contributes to the overall meaning in a piece of input. We will elaborate on this here and add that **communicative value** is based on two features: +/–inherent semantic value and +/–redundancy. When we say that a form has **inherent semantic value**, we mean that the form has some kind of inherent meaning. Going back to our previous example sentence, we can say that the *-ed* in the verb *watched* has inherent semantic value because it expresses the meaning of pastness. An example of a form that does not have inherent semantic value is third person singular *-s* as in *he speaks*. The *-s* does not have inherent semantic value because it does not express any meaning.

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forms that do not have inherent semantic value. Can you think of other examples of forms that do not have inherent semantic value?

Redundancy refers to whether the information carried in the form is also expressed elsewhere in a sentence or utterance. Let's go back to our sample sentence:

Last night Anne watched TV.

Would you say the form *-ed* in the verb *watch* is redundant or not redundant? If you said **redundant**, you are correct. Why? The *-ed* encodes the meaning of pastness and the idea of pastness is already expressed by the content words *last night*.

Any given form can have +semantic value and –redundancy, +semantic value and +redundancy, –semantic value and +redundancy, and –semantic value and –redundancy. VanPatten says that a form's communicative value is higher if it has the characteristics +semantic value and –redundancy than if it has the features +semantic value and +redundancy. Can you guess why? If you can get the referential meaning of a piece of input from something other than from the form in question itself, then the communicative value of that form would be diminished, right? In our sample sentence, the communicative value of the form *-ed* is diminished because we can get the concept of pastness (which the *-ed* encodes) from the content words *last night*. Now watch what happens when we remove *last night* from the input. We are left with the following:

Anne watched TV.

What happened here? We just made the communicative value of *-ed* higher because learners can no longer rely on *last night* to get the temporal reference of this sentence. They *have* to rely on *-ed* for this information. Can you see how we

just structured the input so that the *-ed* is no longer redundant and takes on a higher communicative value? Learners can no longer rely on content words as a strategy to get tense from the sentence.

As you can see, redundancy is not absolute. Whether a form is redundant or not depends on the presence of other items in the input. Forms that are not redundant have higher communicative values. The higher the communicative value of the form, the more likely learners will pay attention to it and make form-meaning connections from it (P1c and P1d).

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increasing the communicative value of forms. How could you increase the communicative value of the bolded forms in the following sentences?

1. Jane has **three** apples.
2. Yesterday I talked to my **professor**.
3. I prefer that you be **on time**.

What happens to forms that do not have inherent semantic value? When a form has semantic value, it has no communicative value regardless of the presence or absence of redundancy. According to VanPatten, forms of low or no communicative value tend to be processed much later or perhaps not at all.

Subprinciple P1e says that learners can only process forms of lower communicative value if they do not have to struggle with understanding the meaning of the message. If comprehension is difficult, they will not have any attentional resources left over to allow them to pay attention to form. However, if the message is comprehensible, there is a greater chance (but still no guarantee) that they will also be able to attend to form. This is why it may be better to give learners (especially beginning learners) sentence-level input before requiring them to process discourse-level input. Because short sentences are easier to process than connected discourse, learners will be more likely to pay attention to the relevant grammatical information that is the target of instruction. Wong's (2002b) study on textual enhancement discussed in Chapter 5 supports this principle. Wong found that learners who received sentence-level input performed better on an assessment task of the target structure (i.e., prepositions with geographical locations) than those who received discourse-level input.

Subprinciple P1f deals with how the position of a form may have an effect on whether or not it is likely to get processed. Consider the following examples:

1. People say that in Toronto you can find a lot of authentic Chinese restaurants.
2. In Toronto, you can find a lot of authentic Chinese restaurants.

In which sentence is the preposition *in* the most salient? If you said the second sentence, you are correct. In the second example, *in* is in initial position which makes it more salient. Research has shown that forms that are in initial position

tend to be easiest to notice followed by forms in final position. Forms in medial position, as shown in the first sentence, tend to be the most difficult to notice and process.

Pause to consider . . .

the position of forms. In which version are past tense verbs more salient? Why?

1. Last night I came home late. I made my wife angry because I was late for dinner and I forgot to pick up the dry cleaning. I ate my dinner in silence and then apologized to my wife.
2. Last night I . . .
 came home late.
 made my wife angry.
 ate my dinner in silence.
 apologized to my wife.

The second principle is also known as the first noun principle. This principle deals with how word order can affect how learners process input. A common word order in some languages such as English is subject-verb-object (SVO). However, some languages such as Spanish do not follow this word order. In the following sentence in Spanish, the first noun-phrase the learner encounters is not a subject but learners who are used to an SVO word order may very well attempt to encode it as such:

La vio Juan en la fiesta anoche. (OVS)

her (object) saw Juan (subject) at the party last night

Juan saw her at the party last night.

Research has shown that when learners are confronted with such sentences, they have a tendency to encode such pronouns and noun phrases as subjects. When this happens, they deliver wrong intake data to their developing linguistic system. As you can see, in this case, it is not that meaning is being derived from a lexical item or another form in the utterance. Meaning is not gotten at all or is gotten wrong.

The subprinciples of Principle 2 point out that while learners have a tendency to rely on word order to interpret sentences or utterances, sometimes they may rely on other cues as well. These cues include lexical semantics (P2a), event probabilities (P2b) and context (P2c). Let's look at the following example in French.

Candice fait laver la voiture à Florian.

(lit. Candice makes to wash the car to Florian.)

Candice makes Florian wash the car.

According to Principle 2, a learner of French would incorrectly think that Candice washes the car rather than Florian because Candice is the first noun they see in the sentence. There are no other cues in the sentence to make them

think otherwise. This is not the case with the next example:

Le professeur fait faire les devoirs aux étudiants.

(lit. The professor makes to do the homework to the students.)

The professor makes the students do the homework.

In this example, when asked who does homework, learners of French will likely say the students do. Does this mean that they processed the syntactic structure of the sentence correctly? Not necessarily. Unlike the first example where either Candice or Florian could have performed the action, there are lexical and contextual cues in this second example that limit the action of *doing homework* to the students. In the context of professors and students, it is typically professors who make students do homework and not the other way around. Thus, based on event probabilities and students' background knowledge about professors and students, learners might be able to interpret the sentence correctly even though they did not process the syntactic structure of the sentence correctly. According to VanPatten, when such cues are present, learners may abandon the first noun principle and rely on these cues instead.

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word order as a processing problem. Can you think of any examples in the language that you teach where word order might interfere with how learners process that form?

To summarize, VanPatten's model of input processing describes how learners process input or how they make form-meaning connections from input. The principles and subprinciples in the model explain what features of input learners tend to pay attention to, which features they tend not to attend to and why.

How Do We Create Structured Input Activities?

Structured input activities are informed by the strategies that learners use to process input. Before we can begin to create a structured activity for a particular grammatical form, we must first understand what strategy learners are using to process that form. Then, and only then, can we structure the input so that learners abandon their inefficient strategies for more optimal ones. So before you design an activity, you need to ask yourself "What is the problem here?" Are learners relying on content words to get meaning instead of form? Is the problem due to an unfamiliar word order? Is it because the position of the form is not salient?

Let's say our learners are having difficulty processing the simple past tense form *-ed* in English. Using the model of input processing as a guide, what strategy or strategies would you say learners rely on to process this form? The answer is Principle 1. As we saw earlier, the idea of pastness can be encoded by temporal adverbs (content words) and by morphological forms. According to

Principle 1, learners will pay more attention to the content words for this information and consequently, may miss the *-ed* form. What we want to do in our activities is structure the input so that learners *must* pay attention to the form instead of the temporal adverbs to get the meaning of pastness. In other words, we don't want them to rely on content words as a strategy. We want to push them to pay attention to the form. Here is an example of what a structured input activity for this form may look like.

You will hear sentences that describe activities that Claude did yesterday or activities that he will do tomorrow. Listen carefully to the verbs in order to determine whether the action happened yesterday or will happen tomorrow. Claude . . .

- 1. a. yesterday b. tomorrow
- 2. a. yesterday b. tomorrow
- 3. a. yesterday b. tomorrow

Instructor's Script:
(Claude . . .)

- 1. talked to his mother.
- 2. walked his dog in the park.
- 3. will call his aunt Freida.

Follow up: Who did some of these activities last night? Raise your hand if you did this activity last night.

- 1. Who called their mothers?
- 2. Who walked their dogs in the park?
- 3. Who called their aunts?

Etc.

Can you see how we structured the input in this activity so that learners must pay attention to verb forms in order to determine the temporal reference of each sentence? Because we know that learners tend to rely on content words, in this case temporal adverbs, to get meaning, we removed the adverbs so that they must pay attention to form in order to get meaning.

There are actually two types of structured input activities: referential activities and affective activities. The above activity is an example of a referential activity. **Referential activities** require that learners pay attention to form in order to get meaning and have right or wrong answers so instructors can immediately check if learners are indeed making the correct form-meaning connections. Notice that these activities require learners to pay attention to both meaning and form in order to successfully complete them. Furthermore, processing form in this activity allows learners to achieve a communicative goal (i.e., finding out who did what last night). **Affective activities**, on the other hand, do not have a right or wrong answer. Instead, they require learners to express an opinion, belief or some other affective response as they are engaged in processing information about the real world. The following is an example of an affective activity for the same target form.

Read the following activities and check off the ones that you did last night.

Last night I . . .

- watched TV.
- fixed myself a cocktail.
- cleaned up my room.
- invited friends over for dinner.

Now share your responses with a classmate. Did you do the same things last night?

Did you notice how the input is structured so that the form is in the most salient position possible? Affective activities work very well in communicative classrooms because they encourage learners to give and receive meaningful information. However, since referential activities allow instructors to assess whether students are making the correct form-meaning connections, it is recommended that instruction begin with those. The purpose of affective activities is to reinforce those connections by providing them with more opportunities to see or hear the form used in a meaningful context as well as to encourage them to respond to the content of the input. More examples of structured input activities are in the Appendix at the end of this book.

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other processing problems. You have just seen an example of a processing problem that deals with Principle 1 of the model of input processing. Can you think of forms in the target language you teach that deal with the other principles in the model? How might you design a structured input activity for these forms?

You will notice that learners do not produce the target structure in structured input activities. This is because the purpose of these activities is to help learners process input or make form-meaning connections better. In order for learners to produce good output, they must first get good input so that they can make good form-meaning connections. For example, you cannot make a dry cake light and moist by beating a cake with a hammer. If you want a good cake (output), you must put in the proper ingredients (input). The same goes for output. If we want learners to eventually produce good output, we have to make sure they are first getting good input. If you would like to learn how to create structured output activities, see Lee and VanPatten's (1995, 2003) volume.

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forced output. In traditional approaches to instruction, learners are often given an explanation of the target form and then immediately asked to produce the form via exercises that require them to manipulate uses of the form. Why might this not be very effective?

Do Structured Input Activities Work?

A great deal of research has been conducted to determine whether structured input activities are effective. Two of these studies will be discussed in detail here.

The first study that examined the use of structured input activities was VanPatten and Cadierno (1993). This study set out to compare an instructional treatment that uses structured input activities with a traditional type of instruction that includes the use of mechanical drills. The instructional treatment that used structured input activities was called Processing Instruction (PI) because this treatment was designed to push learners to use better processing strategies to process input. The target forms in this study were Spanish object pronouns and word order. Subjects in the PI group were first given explicit information about how object pronouns work in Spanish. They were also told that learners of Spanish have a tendency to think that the first noun they encounter is the subject. They were told that this is not an effective strategy because Spanish has a more flexible word order and the first noun is not always the subject. After receiving this information, the subjects engaged in a series of structured input activities that pushed them to interpret word order and object pronouns correctly. They were never required to produce the target forms.

Subjects in the traditional instruction (TI) group received an explanation of object pronouns (but no information about inefficient processing strategies) and then they were given mechanical, then meaningful, then communicative output drills. This sequence of drills is very common in foreign language textbooks. Mechanical drills do not require that learners pay attention to meaning in order to complete the drill. Meaningful drills require some attention to meaning but there is only one correct response and the response is often obvious to learners. The control group did not receive any instruction or practice.

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the value of mechanical drills. Some argue that mechanical drills have no value for language instruction because they are devoid of meaning and only give learners practice in manipulating language forms (the research done on processing instruction, in fact, shows that this type of practice is unnecessary). Others argue that mechanical drills have psychological value for learners because they are easy to do and give learners a sense of accomplishment when they are done with them. Which of these positions do you agree with?

The researchers found that on an interpretation test that required subjects to select pictures that best corresponded to what they heard, the PI group made improvements while the TI and control group did not. On a production test that required subjects to complete sentences based on pictures that they saw, both the TI and PI groups made the same amount of improvement. The control

group did not improve. When subjects were tested again one month later with these tests, the same results were found.

The researchers concluded that PI is more beneficial than TI because not only did subjects in the PI group make improvements in ability to interpret object pronouns, but their input processing of this structure resulted in some kind of change in their system that allowed them to access what they learned for production. This is an important finding because at no time during treatment did subjects in the PI group ever practice producing object pronouns. Yet on the production task, they were able to perform as well as subjects in the TI group who received lots of practice in producing this structure. The subjects in the TI group on the other hand, could not do the interpretation task. Their performance on this task was no better than those in the control group who received no instruction. Subjects in the TI group were only good at doing what they practiced doing during treatment. Similar results have been found with many other PI studies using different target structures and languages (e.g., Cadierno, 1995; Cheng, 1995; VanPatten & Wong, 2004).

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the evidence that mechanical drills are not necessary. How do the results of VanPatten and Cadierno's study show that mechanical drills are not necessary? Hint: Think of the results in terms of the types of practice that the PI group and the TI group received. Do you think instructors should give learners mechanical drills even if these drills are not necessary?

You may have noticed that the treatment in the PI group included both explicit information and structured input activities and may have said to yourself: "Could the superior results found for PI be due to the explicit information?" A study by VanPatten and Oikkenon (1996) set out to address this question and they found that the explicit information really did not help the subjects at all. They gave one group of subjects both explicit information and structured input activities. A second group received only the structured input activities and a third group received only the explicit information. These researchers found that the group that had both structured input activities and explicit information and the group that received only structured input activities made the same amount of improvement while the group that had only explicit information made no improvement at all. Can you see why this shows that the explicit information was not necessary? Had the explicit information been important, then the group that got both explicit information and structured input activities should have been better than the group that only got structured input activities. But this was not the case. The group that got only structured input activities was able to do just as well as the group that got both. This shows that the structured input alone was enough to push learners to change their processing strategies. Other studies that have found similar results include Benati (2004), Sanz and Morgan Short (2002), and Wong (2004).

Pause to consider...

the role of explicit information. VanPatten and Oikarinen found that explicit information was not beneficial in their study. The structured input activities alone were enough to push learners to make the correct form-meaning corrections. Can you think of some situations where explicit information might play a more beneficial role? Hint: think about the nature of some other input enhancement techniques. How is structured input different from these techniques?

What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Structured Input Activities in the L2 Classroom?

One of the most important advantages of structured input activities is that they are directly targeted at learners' processing strategies so there is a better chance that these activities will indeed help learners make the correct form-meaning connections. In fact, this is the only input enhancement technique that directly attempts to alter learners' processing strategies. Furthermore, there is a substantial amount of research to support that this technique is indeed effective.

Another advantage is that unlike input flood and textual enhancement where we can't be sure what learners notice and process, we can immediately check if learners are making the correct form-meaning connections with structured input activities. If learners do not make the appropriate form-meaning connections, they cannot successfully complete the activities.

Structured input activities are ideal for communicative language teaching classrooms because the activities encourage meaningful exchanges of information while requiring learners to pay attention to form at the same time. If instructors notice that their learners have trouble with a particular form, they could drop some structured input activities into their lesson to help learners process the form better.

A disadvantage of this technique is that structured input activities do require a lot of planning and thought. Any old input activity will not do. In order for the activity to be effective, the instructor must determine what inefficient strategy learners are using to process a particular form and then manipulate the input so that learners will be forced to use more optimal strategies. The results suggest, however, that they are well worth the effort.

How Do We Implement Structured Input Activities in the L2 Classroom?

Step 1: Identify the Processing Problem or Strategy

The first and perhaps most important step in developing structured input activities for the classroom is to identify and understand what the processing problem is for the form in question. Why are learners having problems processing a particular form? What strategies are they using that are causing them to

process this form inefficiently or incorrectly? Is it due to a tendency to rely on lexical items (i.e., Principle 1)? Is it due to a word order problem (i.e., Principle 2)? Is the location of the form a problem (P1f.)? Or is some combination of factors involved? Remember that the goal of structured input is to push learners away from their less than optimal strategies for processing input. If the processing problem or strategy is not identified, we will not be able to create structured input activities to help reach this goal.

Step 2: Follow Guidelines for Developing Structured Input Activities

Once the processing problem has been identified, then the development of structured input activities can begin. The input in these activities should be structured so that learners cannot rely on inefficient strategies to successfully complete the activities. The activities should force them to use more optimal strategies to process the form in question. The following guidelines are adapted from Lee and VanPatten (1995, 2003). See also Wong (2002a, 2004a) for discussions on how to create structured input activities.

1. *Present one thing at a time.* This means that only one rule of usage and/or one form of a paradigm should be presented at a time. The reason for this guideline is simply this: when there is less to pay attention to, it is easier to pay attention.
2. *Keep meaning in focus.* You have heard this many times. In order for form-meaning connections to happen, learners must pay attention to both meaning and form. If the activity can be completed without attention to meaning, then it is not a structured activity.
3. *Move from sentences to connected discourse.* When we teach grammar via structured input activities, it is preferable to begin with sentences first because short sentences are easier to process than connected discourse. When comprehension is easy, learners will be more likely to pay attention to the relevant grammatical information that is the target of instruction.
4. *Use both oral and written input.* Both oral and written input should be used in structured input activities because learners should have opportunities to receive input in both modalities. While all learners need oral input, more visual learners would benefit from "seeing" the input as well. Not giving these learners exposure to written input could put them at a disadvantage in learning situations.
5. *Have learners do something with the input.* This guideline goes hand in hand with the goals of communicative language teaching. The activities should not only be meaningful, they should also be purposeful. This means that learners must have a reason for attending to the input. Therefore, the activities should have learners responding to the input in some way to ensure that they are actively processing the input.
6. *Keep the learner's processing strategies in mind.* This cannot be stressed enough. This guideline is in fact what distinguishes structured input activities from other input enhancement techniques. Remember that

the goal of these activities is to help learners move away from inefficient processing strategies so that they adopt more optimal ones. Therefore, the processing strategies that learners use to process a particular form must be kept in mind at all times in developing structured input activities. If the activity is not constructed to correct an inefficient processing strategy, then it is *not* a structured input activity. This is why it is critical that the processing problem or the processing strategies that learners use for a given form be clearly identified *before* the activities are created.

Is There a Role for Explicit Information in Structured Input Activities?

As you saw in the research on Processing Instruction, learners were given explicit information about the target form before they engaged in structured input activities. This information was different from information used in other types of instructional interventions because it included information about inefficient strategies that learners use to process a particular form. However, as we saw from the research (e.g., VanPatten and Oikkenon), this information was not necessary. Research shows that when done correctly, structured input activities alone are sufficient to help learners make correct form-meaning connections (at least for the target structures investigated so far). This is because structured input activities work to alter inefficient or wrong processing strategies. Learners are required to make the correct form-meaning connections in order to successfully complete the activities.

This of course does not mean that explicit information cannot be used with structured input. Some learners are used to seeing this type of information and may like to have it even if it is not necessary. The important thing to remember is that it is the activity that will push the correct form-meaning connections, not the explicit information.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

This chapter presented a type of input enhancement that alters how learners process input so that they make better form-meaning connections. Structured input activities are directly based on the strategies that learners use to process input. To our knowledge, this is the only input enhancement technique that makes use of such information. This information is important because the more we know about what learners do with input, the better we will be at helping them process input better. Because structured input activities are designed with learners' processing strategies in mind, they probably stand the most chance at altering learners' inefficient strategies so that optimal input processing can take place. I have said elsewhere that creating activities without first identifying a processing strategy is like a doctor passing out medication without knowing what is wrong with the patient. Sometimes it may work and sometimes it won't but we won't know why. With structured input activities, the doctor (instructor) always knows why.

ENHANCE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Creating Structured Input Activities

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