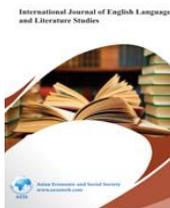




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PRACTICE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: APPLICATIONS IN CLASSROOM SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT

Current thinking within the field of second language acquisition (SLA) indicates that practice is indeed a key variable in L2 acquisition, at least in terms of the rate of learning and the long term success that learners come to enjoy in using the language fluently and accurately. This paper defines and discusses the construct of practice in L2 learning, followed by a discussion of the role of practice in L2 development. Finally, in the light of the demonstrated effect of practice, I present evidence of two computer-assisted language learning (CAAL) software applications that may accelerate students' chances of improving their L2 classroom performance.

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Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the role and kinds of practice that contribute to language learning. I argue that the use of CALL practice applications and the role of input, output and interaction based practice are equally important in L2 classroom development.

1. WHAT IS PRACTICE?

Despite the fact that most language learners and users take it for granted that second language learning requires a great deal of practice to achieve the desired level of competence, this is simply a characteristic of the EFL environment, where learners' exposure to English is not as authentic as if they were in an ESL setting.

Traditionally, the concept of practice refers to the repetition of an activity, or doing something over and over again in order to improve or perfect certain skills. Carlson (1997) defines practice as “repeated performance of the same (or closely similar) routine”. In the language learning context, practice is a part of learning process whose objective is to develop and hasten L2 and FL learners’ progress through the lower stages. These types of definitions suggest that language learning only takes place through drills and repetition. This approach to practice comes from behaviorist theories which eventually led to the rise of the audio-lingual method in the USA during the 1950s and 1960s. This method considers language learning as a process of habit formation: it ignores meaning and focuses on form. It is of great importance to cover the constructs of practice in second language learning. Therefore, below I discuss the role of practice within the following constructs: namely, input, output, and interaction.

2. TYPES OF PRACTICE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

2.1. Input Practice

The role of input in L2 learning has been the subject of many studies. One of the important concepts in L2 learning is Stephen Krashen’s comprehensible input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985; 1994). Advocates of the input hypothesis believe that only input that is understood will actually feed into L2 learner acquisition.

For example, an English language learner who understands the meaning of *turn off the TV* can in turn understand *turn off the mobile*. This means that, as the teacher increases the learner’s language comprehension by scaffolding new information, it is necessary for the teacher to build new information on the learner’s previous knowledge.

Therefore, L2 teachers must try to provide their students with comprehensible input. For example, an L2 learner would not learn simply by sitting in an L2 class. Appropriate L2 development is bound to happen due to the amount of comprehensible input that this learner is exposed to. Extending Krashen’s input hypothesis Krashen (1985; 1994), Ellis (2008) claims that Krashen’s input hypothesis is concerned only with acquisition, and makes the following claims:

1. Learners progress along the natural order by understanding input that contains structures a little bit beyond their current level of competence (i+1).
2. Although comprehensible input is necessary for acquisition to take place, it is not sufficient, as learners also need to be affectively disposed to “let in” the input they comprehend.
3. Input becomes comprehensible as a result of simplification and with the help of contextual and extralinguistic clues; “fine-tuning” ... is not necessary.
4. Speaking is the result of acquisition, not its cause; learner production does not contribute directly to acquisition.... (2008: 246-247).

Furthermore, attention seems to play an important role in input practice. From an attentional viewpoint, Leow (2007) defines *receptive* practice as follows:

any exposure to manipulated L2 input that provides not only various exemplars of targeted L2 forms or structures upon which learners’ attention to (and/or awareness of) is directly or

indirectly premised but also some form of opportunity to perform a limited productive or nonproductive task or activity (e.g., selecting one out of two options, completing a problem-solving task, translating) during the exposure”.

He further argues that L2 learners who were not exposed to grammatical input before and/or during practice show a lower level of accuracy than those who were (ibid). Moreover, [Muranoi \(2007\)](#) argues that teachers of L2 can direct their learners toward automatizing lower processing to enable them to use much of their cognitive resources. This means that grammatical input, prior or during practice, is usually altered in the way that the teacher sees fit. Such alteration shifts the L2 learners’ attention and /or awareness toward what the teacher wants them to learn. This is helpful for both the L2 learner and teacher. It insures that development in L2 is conducted within the desired framework, which results in L2 attention and / or awareness to the grammatical input.

In the above discussion, the role of practice is centered on comprehensible input, attention, awareness, and explicit grammatical input. Teachers must try to provide their learners with comprehensible input in order to make L2 development possible. L2 learners are expected to benefit most and become highly aware if their attention is directed toward manipulated L2 input. Moreover, L2 learners achieve higher levels of accuracy if L2 teachers provide them with explicit grammatical information.

2.2. Output Practice

It is undoubtedly the case that both L2 learners and teachers find output practice very important. Output practice refers to “any activity designed to provide L2 learners with opportunities to produce output” [Muranoi \(2007\)](#). [Swain \(2000\)](#) suggests that the importance of output to L2 learning may be due to the fact that “output pushes learners to process language more deeply – with more mental effort – than does input” (2000: 99). She further proposes that “output may stimulate learners to move from the semantic, open-ended, strategic processing prevalent in comprehension to the complete grammatical processing needed for accurate production”. In other words, this suggests that when L2 learners produce “pushed output”, they become more aware of their linguistic competence. Therefore, L2 output moves from being semantically processed to being syntactically processed. Output practice may help improve fluency and automaticity.

[Swain \(1985; 1995\)](#) proposed the comprehensible output hypothesis as complementary to Krashen’s input hypothesis. She defines comprehensible output as “output that extends the linguistic repertoire of the learner as he or she attempts to create precisely and appropriately the meaning desired” (1985: 252). She further argues that comprehensible output is important for L2 acquisition independently from comprehensible input (ibid). Therefore, L2 acquisition may be effected when learners make an effort to produce comprehensible output.

[Swain \(1985;1995;1998\)](#) suggests that the roles of output in L2 learning are noticing, hypothesis formulation and testing, and metalinguistic function. Each of these is discussed separately below.

2.2.1. Noticing

Kuiken and Vedder (2005) suggest that “language production may prompt learners to deepen their awareness of grammatical and lexical rules” (2005: 356). Furthermore, Muranoi (2007) assumes “that producing output promotes both noticing a hole in the interlanguage system and noticing the gap between the interlanguage and the target language, both of which trigger important cognitive processes such as selective attention and cognitive comparison” (2007: 57). If L2 learners notice that they cannot produce output in the target language (TL), they develop a sense of awareness of what they need to fix in their language and may also result in selecting the comprehensible input they need. Therefore, output practice plays a role in helping L2 learners recognize their linguistic problems.

2.2.2. Hypothesis Formulation and Testing

Noticing also leads to hypothesis formulation and testing which refers to L2 learners using output to formulate new language forms and structures in order to communicate. Learners also have the chance to get feedback and test their hypothesis (Swain, 1998). Moreover, output errors produced by learners, whether written or spoken, give a clear image of how learners hypothesize about their TL (Swain, 2000). Muranoi (2007) suggests that “learners can test hypotheses against feedback from external resources” (2007: 58). However, if feedback is not available, learners test their hypotheses based on their internal knowledge (Swain, 1998). In other words, output production and hypothesis formulation lead L2 learners to an awareness of their linguistic problems, which in return helps them to seek out solutions.

2.2.3. Metalinguistic Function

Swain (1998) argues that “learners use language to reflect on language use” (1998: 68). This language which learners use for this purpose is called metatalk and describes what learners think of their TL. In fact, metatalk may help learners to gain a deeper awareness of structure and meaning in language use. (ibid)

In summary, “output practice that leads learners to notice gaps in their interlanguage systems, test their existing knowledge, reflect consciously on their own language, and process language syntactically is expected to be the most beneficial for L2 development” (Muranoi, 2007).

2.3. Interaction Practice

Interaction provides L2 learners with plentiful possibilities for input and output. It provides chances for L2 learners to exchange linguistic information where they can negotiate meaning, get feedback, and produce output. Swain (2000) suggests that interaction “provides learners with the opportunity to use the target language, this is, to ‘output’ ” (p. 99).

The importance of interaction has led to the interaction hypothesis, credited to Long (1996), who defines it as “*negotiation for meaning*, and especially negotiation work that triggers *interactional* adjustments by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because

it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (1996: 451-452). Another definition of the interaction hypothesis refers to how “engaging in interpersonal oral interaction in which communication problems arise and are negotiated *facilitates* incidental language acquisition” (Ellis, 2008). What this implies is that L2 learners negotiate meaning through interaction and collaborative dialogue. It suggests that “verbalization mediates the internalization of external activity” (Swain, 2000). L2 learners learn how to construct new sentences by their attempts to clarify and explain themselves. Therefore, interaction provides L2 learners with the opportunities to get modified input, negotiate meaning, and produce output.

Interaction can contribute to L2 learning through several processes which sometimes overlap. These processes include the following: negotiating of meaning, feedback, recast and output. I briefly discuss these processes below in relation to interaction.

Feedback refers to “a mechanism which provides the learner with information regarding the success or failure of a given process.” (Leeman, 2007). Feedback during interaction can be negative or positive. Recast is a type of feedback which consists of the “responses to learners that provide expansion or implicit correction” (Ohta, 2000). Mackey (2007) describe recasts as being “more linguistically target like reformulations of what a learner has just said” (2007: 92). As a result of feedback, learners are expected to produce unmodified or modified output. The unmodified output is when L2 learners are not pushed to reflect on their linguistic utterances. On the other hand, when L2 learners are successfully pushed to reflect on their language, they are expected to produce modified output. The initial reaction to feedback is termed uptake. Uptake refers to “a student’s utterance that immediately follows the teacher’s feedback and that constitutes a reaction in some way to the teacher’s intention to draw attention to some aspect of the student’s initial utterance” (Lyster and Ranta, 1997): it is when an L2 learner responds by saying “OK” or “Aha” to the teacher after feedback. Moreover, modified output is the reformulation of a linguistic form after feedback, while uptake is an L2 response signaling the noticing and attention.

Therefore, the role of interaction as practice is that it seems to influence noticing in the SLA process. L2 learners are provided with the chance to try out new formulations and structures. They get the chance to check and test whether their hypotheses are correct or not. They also get the chance to get feedback from natives, competent peers, teachers, instructors...etc. In addition, they get to modify their input and/or output according to the feedback.

In short, interaction is the quest of many L2 learners and teachers to further enhance L2 leaning. Based on the theoretical discussion above, we can infer that these constructs of practice occasionally overlap. There is no fixed answer that can easily define what practice is and what types of roles it plays in L2 learning. However, findings to date provide reasonable suggestions and theoretical guidelines to what to think of practice and how better to use it in the L2 classroom.

3. L2 PRACTICE USING COMPUTER APPLICATIONS

Computers play an important role in language learning. The interaction that happens with a computer in learning languages is called computer-assisted language learning (CALL). Levy (1997) defines CALL as “the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning”. According to Pennington, “CALL promotes a better learning / teaching process” (Pennington, 1996).

Levy and Stockwell (2006) categorize CALL as either “synchronous or asynchronous” (2006: 84). Synchronous CALL is when information is exchanged between two or more participants at the same time. This exchange can involve visual or/and audio information. However, it requires participants to be online at the same time for it to work. On the other hand, asynchronous CALL does not allow for simultaneous information exchange. Exchange takes place at different times, and participants can log in and out whenever they like.

More recently, Chapelle (2010) has explained that the main concern of CALL is the implementation of pedagogies and their evaluation through technologies. Teachers and learners have the following technologies available for them; a) Language teaching interactive tutorial programs. b) Learning Websites. c) Computer mediated communication (CMC). d) Linguistic aids (ibid).

Drawing on the previous discussion about practice, below I discuss two CALL software programs/materials; Chat and PowerPoint.

4. CHAT

The most widely used form of synchronous CALL is chat rooms. Chat rooms are interactive live messaging boards. Chat rooms can take place on internet sites, computer networks or other intelligent devices such as Blackberry phones, iPhones, etc.. Participants get to send and receive text-based, audio, and / or video messages like MSN Messenger, Skype, or Paltalk. Chat rooms help L2 learners to get comprehensible input and the chance to produce linguistic output (Mackey, 2007). They also provide the opportunity for L2 learners to practice their target language with native speakers or with other language learners. Such interaction provides them with opportunities to produce pushed output.

L2 teachers can easily create a chat room online through many websites (e.g. nicenet.org). However, there are some guidelines they need to follow in creating chat tasks. Pellettieri (2000) suggests that to encourage students to negotiate meaning, tasks should be goal-oriented, with expected possible outcomes, they should require participants to ask and give information from / to each other, and participants should be introduced to concepts, ideas and language that are slightly above their current level. Interestingly, she points out that students while chatting via computer have more time to reflect on their language. They self-monitor themselves and resort to backspacing to fix typing and spelling mistakes. She even points out that they use backspacing for more elaboration (ibid). Therefore, chatting provides L2 learners with real-time interaction with others in which they negotiate meaning by input / output modification and feedback responses.

There are some disadvantages in using chat tasks in L2 learning. One, in open chat rooms, L2 learners may acquire inappropriate language such as dialectal or slang items. Two, since the nature of chatting is topic-oriented and these topics tend to change, L2 learners need to familiarize themselves with communicative differences from the real world. Three, if L2 learners' identities are anonymous in chat rooms, it might create *unrealistic realities* (Levy and Stockwell, 2006).

5. POWERPOINT

PowerPoint is a well-known presentation software application. It was originally developed for business use but is now popular as an educational tool. There are plenty of reasons behind the success of PowerPoint as a CALL program. PowerPoint is a fairly easy program to use and it does not require a lot to produce fundamental projects. It is in an electronic format which makes its distribution and editing fairly easy. It also has embedded printing options which allow for printing hand-outs in different sizes. Extra information can be hidden inside the slides to provide expected answers or extra feedback. Teachers can guide their thoughts and lessons in a systematic and organized matter.

Using PowerPoint in the L2 classroom can provide learners with new language materials in an appealing and stimulating way. For example, it can present reading texts, dialogues, and new vocabulary as animated texts or audio/video clips. Drawing on the above discussion about input practice, PowerPoint can be used to expose L2 learners to modified input and direct their attention toward specific TL features. Moreover, it can provide L2 learners with the chance to preform productive and / or nonproductive activities such as problem solving and translating tasks. It also can help L2 learner to make more use of their cognitive resources by automatizing lower level processes. For example, using animation, highlighting a word or a sentence, and / or using intro sounds effects when important information appears on screen.

PowerPoint is not just a 'chalk and talk' program, it can provide L2 learners with interactive activities. One of the most famous PowerPoint activities is called action maze, which is a problem solving task. Moreover, teachers must be careful while designing PowerPoint tasks and slides, too much text in a slide or simply wrong choice of color can distract students and / or cause them to become bored. However, PowerPoint comes with predesigned templates which can be very helpful and time saving.

It can be difficult to use PowerPoint in L2 classroom for many reasons. It is not easy for many teachers to spend time and effort on creating L2 learning materials using PowerPoint. Some teachers simply lack the experience in handling the computer itself. Others might just find it impossible to use it just because of the lack of resources. However, once the project is completed, it can be very rewarding; the same PowerPoint file can be used many times in the future. It can also be edited by adding or removing information at any time, which makes it improve over time and is very helpful in L2 teaching. Therefore, if PowerPoint is put into practice correctly, it can be very helpful in enhancing L2 classroom development.

6. CONCLUSION

Whether it is input, output, interaction, or all at the same time that should be ranked highest in importance, practice does clearly play a role in L2 learning. For L2 teachers, understanding the constructs of practice and the role behind each one of them should propel the wheel of L2 classroom development forward. It must be noted that each classroom has its own identity, and that what might work for one classroom does not necessarily mean it will work for another. Individual differences also play a very big role in determining what type of practice might be successful. Teachers should apply practice methodologies that best suit their classroom.

Moreover, computer-assisted language learning is proving to be very helpful in L2 classrooms. The correct use of CALL practice applications should be a strong factor in L2 classroom development. Nonetheless, CALL is still under development, just as language technologies are in rapid development. L2 classrooms should enhance learners' language use and development through raising learner knowledge in language and in the use of technological resources to aid language learning (Chapelle, 2010).

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