

THE IMPORTANCE OF USING NATURAL LANGUAGE IN LEVEL-ONE CLASSES

Teachers often ask how it is possible to have meaningful discussions with their level-one students when these students do not know any tenses other than the present. I think it is fairly obvious what to do if we keep this in mind:

"Comprehension precedes production."

Therefore, we should not expect students to produce everything they can comprehend. I made up a saying (I get a little glow of pride when other people quote it):

"Shelter vocabulary; do not shelter grammar."

Here is an example of what I mean. Suppose that you meet a 3-yr-old boy whose daddy is gone to military service. You look deep into the child's eyes and you say, "I'll bet that you wish that he would come home soon." He looks at you soberly and nods his head slowly.

He comprehended exactly what you said. Despite the fact that you used a sentence which has three verbs (bet, wish, come). Despite the fact that the first verb uses what appears to be a future structure for a not future meaning. Despite the fact that there are two dependent clauses. Despite the fact that what appears to be a conditional structure is actually used to express what in Spanish requires a subjunctive usage.

Should we avoid talking that way to a three-year-old? No! He comprehends perfectly. He may not be able to make up a sentence just like that on his own (production) but his comprehension is perfect. He will learn to make complex sentences like that himself, if he hears normal, natural language from good language models.

Therefore, when I talked to level-one students about their lives, we talked about what happened, what they did, where they went, who went with them, if the movie was good, etc. I would not put that into the present tense when talking to a three-year-old in English, since that would be bad English. Similarly, it serves no purpose to model bad French for second language learners! I talked to them about what

they planned to do in the future, tomorrow, at the dance, this coming weekend, next year, or over spring break. We just talked. When they made mistakes, I would sometimes rephrase it for them like this: "Yes, I *will go* to Ross for the dress. Bravo!" and we kept talking. Some students heard the grammar correction and others didn't even notice.

Application to the classroom

So what are the implications for the classroom teacher? We should talk to our students the way we talk to children. That is, we should use sheltered vocabulary, complex grammar, infinite patience, and encouragement.

We all speak by using language that sounds right to us. If students do not get sufficient input that models sophisticated grammar, how are they going to become comfortable using those structures when they reach level 3 or level 4? If we wait until level 3 or 4 to speak with these structures, we are not likely to get a good result. The reason is that we expect students to produce something that does not sound right to them.

I found that I could use all tenses (present, past and future) and I could use moods (even of irregular verbs) when having discussions with my level I students. Most of the time they could understand me. If there were any confusion, I would quickly translate and go on with the conversation in French. Rarely did using unfamiliar tenses cause confusion. My students could not produce those tenses, but they had no trouble comprehending them.

On a similar note, I found that my students enjoyed reading children's literature during their free reading time. French teachers usually shy away from French children's literature because it often uses a literary tense called "passé simple." This tense is not used in normal conversation. It is the last verb structure we teach because it is so "hard." My level-one students had no trouble with those books. They asked me what "fut" and "eut" meant, and I told them. They did not find these stories to be difficult; they just read and enjoyed the stories.

I also found that my level-one students began to use the past, even though I had not taught it to them! They had been hearing it in our class discussions, and I had taught them how to say, "I went" and "I played." With that little bit of teaching, they were quite comfortable. They used past and present tenses when we chatted in French.

Because of these experiences and observations, chatting with students became a daily practice. I said whatever I wanted to say. I sometimes had to slow down, rephrase, repeat, or translate to make sure that what I said was comprehended. But the students were comfortable with real language. They enjoyed real French music: folk, popular, cultural, rap, etc. The fact that they had not been exposed to the grammar contained in these songs was not an impediment to their enjoyment.

Students who enjoyed grammar were able to experiment with advanced structures. For example, a girl in French I loved figuring out past tenses. She asked a few questions and soon was using the past fairly accurately. Another student loved the simple future and looked for books that had the future tense in them. (Quand je serai grand by Mercer Myer was her favorite.) She was only in French I, but she had no trouble with the future. These examples are the “top 4% types,” obviously. Normal people don’t even notice tenses!

Example of input vs. output levels

If we limit (shelter) the grammatical content of the input we provide, then we are doing our students a disservice. When students retell the day’s story or tell about an event, it will be within their production capabilities. Their production capability will lag behind their capacity to comprehend.

A level-one teacher’s narration may be something like this: “She walks slowly down the street with a crown on her head because she wants Jennifer Aniston to see her. (Subjunctive here) She wants Jennifer Aniston to be jealous. (Subjunctive again.) She wants Jennifer Aniston to go (subjunctive) shopping in every store in Hollywood looking for a big beautiful crown with two rubies and four emeralds.”

A student’s retell would be something like this: “She walks slowly down the street with a big crown on her head.” The top students can be expected to describe the crown (2 rubies and 4 emeralds) while doing a retell. They do not have to produce the subjunctive; they simply comprehend what was said.

Textbooks vs. acquisition

It is interesting to note that typical level-one textbooks have lessons on “ser” vs “estar” and on gender. Yet even intelligent, talented

teachers, with years of language lessons behind them, make errors in these two grammatical areas! The reason is that these features are not mastered until very late in the language acquisition process.

On the other hand, past tenses and subjunctive mood are not as late acquired as *ser/estar*. Yet most textbooks hold off on those verb forms until levels 2 and 3.

By providing students with authentic language beginning in level one, we give our students a boost. When they reach level 3, all they have to do is learn the rules that govern what already sounds right.

If we do not provide our students with real, authentic language, then we are slowing down (inhibiting) their ability to acquire the language. The more natural we are in our speech, the greater their chances are of acquiring naturally.