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Source: *The French Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Dec., 2002), pp. 265-276

Published by: [American Association of Teachers of French](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3132708>

Accessed: 29/01/2015 13:12

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# The PACE Model: A Story-Based Approach to Meaning and Form for Standards-Based Language Learning

by *Bonnie Adair-Hauck  
and Richard Donato*

*A word is a microcosm of human  
consciousness*  
L.S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*

WE WILL EXPLORE the PACE Model (Donato and Adair-Hauck, "PACE"), a story-based approach to the teaching of grammar in a standards-based language classroom.<sup>1</sup> The 1996 *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* emphasize that communication is at the core of second language learning. Communication has been defined as the personal expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning where information, feelings, and ideas are exchanged in talk, gestures, and writing (Lee and VanPatten). The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* further refine this definition by organizing our language-using activities into three modes—interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational—each mode specifying how language is used in the process of communication. In the past, a traditional classroom, with its emphasis on grammatical competence and explicit knowledge of language rules, did not provide occasions for learners to communicate in the ways communication is currently defined by psycholinguists, applied linguists, materials developers, and the language teaching profession (Adair-Hauck, Donato, and Cumo-Johanssen). Unfortunately, many students who spent years learning the formal properties of the language (sound system, verb conjugations, rules of syntax, vocabulary lists, etc.) could not, in the end, exchange information, express ideas or feelings, construct and control problem solving, or develop and nurture a social relationship in a second language (Barnes;

Donato and Adair-Hauck, "PACE"; Hall, "Aw Man," "Communication Standard"; Adair-Hauck and Cumo-Johanssen).

Cooper underscores the important role of communication: "It is through communication that we are able to improve our world, to prosper and enjoy it (43)." Communicating, in Cooper's broad sense of the word, involves more than Chomsky's notion of linguistic or grammatical competence; communication requires both communicative and interactional competence (Mehan; Hall, "Communication Standard") and the ability to use language in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. The *Standards* capture the notions of communicative and interactional competence by stressing the need to "know how, when, and why to say what to whom" (11).

Added to this goal is the need to provide students with opportunities to reflect upon the language system they are learning to use. Often, teachers committed to providing communicative and interactive language learning experiences for their students find it a challenge to integrate what is called "grammar instruction" or "focus on form" into their classrooms. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* stress that knowledge of the language system including grammar, vocabulary, phonology, pragmatics, and discourse features undergirds the accuracy of communication. Furthermore, researchers who have investigated immersion programs (ideal instructional contexts for language acquisition) have also stressed the need for language arts or focus on form for second language development (Allen et al.; Harley, "Instructional strategies"; Swain, "Communicative Competence," "Manipulating"; Lyster and Ranta). Clearly, second language researchers agree that focus on form (Long's term) can be beneficial to students and is, in fact, critical to making progress as language users (Lightbown and Spada; Donato and Adair-Hauck, "PACE"; Herron and Tomasello; Long; Ellis, *Classroom*; Adair-Hauck and Donato, "Foreign Language Explanations"; Salaberry).

### *The Explicit/Implicit Controversy*

We have made great strides in the teaching of foreign languages over the years. Our profession's approach to foreign language instruction has evolved due to theory and research emphasizing the importance of meaningful practice, contextualization, and authentic language tasks, to name a few important concepts. However, in spite of the continual evolution in instructional approach, grammar instruction—one component of language instruction—has not received the same attention as other areas of language instruction.<sup>2</sup> Although many researchers agree on the benefits of some grammar instruction, how to teach grammar has met with little agreement (Shaffer; Fotos and Ellis; VanPatten and Cadierno; DeKeyser and Sokalski; Salaberry). Furthermore, most research on grammar learning is often conducted in highly controlled laboratory settings

and rarely tested against the realities of the language classroom with real teachers and learners and all that this implies (Ellis, "Teaching and Research").<sup>3</sup> The controversy has become particularly acute in the framework of communicative language teaching, which has consistently underscored the importance of stressing meaning over form, and in so doing, has dichotomized language use itself, pitting one focus against another (Johnson).

For years, our profession has been grappling with polarized views concerning the teaching of grammar or focus on form within a communicative framework. An explicit method of grammar instruction advocates direct teacher explanations of rules followed by related manipulative exercises illustrating these rules. Many of us have probably experienced this method of grammar instruction, since most textbooks present grammar in this fashion. Unfortunately, as Waltz points out, many manipulative drills are grounded in shallow and artificial contexts that have little importance to the real concerns of students. Brooks and Donato remind us that these practice opportunities are not capable of engaging the students' commitment to learning, their imaginations, or their desire to communicate using the forms they are learning. It is common for teachers to observe that these mechanical, repetitive drills often result in apathetic and unmotivated responses in students, no matter how much context is given in the directions or how much personalization is provided.

Another potential problem with explicit grammar instruction is that it implies a direct instructional and authoritative role on the part of the teacher, referred to by Lee and VanPatten as the "Atlas Complex." Conversely, this practice assigns a passive role on the part of the students. Student interaction only takes place, if it occurs at all, after the teacher's grammatical explanations and after several practice exercises. Clearly, this linear model of acquiring a form before using a form has distinct disadvantages in terms of fostering students' desire to use the form, assisting their understanding of the form in question, and providing a valid reason for even learning the particular grammar point.

On the other side of the instructional dichotomy is implicit grammar instruction. This form of instruction rejects the need for any explicit focus on form. Some argue that learners can acquire language naturally if they are provided with sufficient comprehensible input from the teacher and that grammatical development follows its own natural internal syllabus (Krashen, *Principles*; Terrell; Dulay and Burt). In other words, if students are exposed to a sufficient amount of language that they are interested in and understand globally, they will eventually be able to hypothesize and to determine how the structures work, their systematicity, their function and their meaning. Theoretically, the learners should be able to do the hypothesizing and language analysis on their own, although research has shown that some learners do not attend to or induce the teacher's grammatical agenda in these implicit, inductive lessons (for a detailed

discussion of the implicit/explicit dichotomy see Adair-Hauck, "Descriptive Analysis"; Adair-Hauck, Donato and Cumo-Johanssen). As Herron and Tomasello state, the inductive method cannot guarantee that the learner will discover the underlying concepts or that the induced concepts will actually be correct. Clearly, this implicit approach places little importance on instruction, reducing the teacher to a provider of input rather than explanation as in the explicit approach. Furthermore, the implicit/inductive approach can be frustrating to adolescent or adult learners, many of whom have already become analytical with regard to the rules that govern their native languages. These learners often want to hasten the learning process by consciously comparing and contrasting their own native language rules to the rules that govern the new target language.

### *Reformulating Grammar Instruction*

Although explicit and implicit instruction are clearly opposite approaches to teaching and learning, they share some notable deficiencies. Neither approach acknowledges the critical role of the teacher in negotiating and constructing explanations of how the new language works, and neither approach acknowledges the contributions and backgrounds that the learners bring to collaboration with the teacher in constructing an explanation. Moreover, neither approach recognizes how learning takes place between people in the world outside of the classroom. A Vygotskian psycholinguistic approach to instruction (Wood, Bruner, and Ross) indicates that learning is a dynamic, reciprocal, and interactive process.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, Vygotsky realized and acknowledged the powerful tool of discursive interaction between human beings outside of the classroom. Through dialogue and guided participation (Rogoff's term), the adult or expert challenges, supports, and finally empowers the learner to construct and solve problems on his/her own. Unlike his predecessors, Vygotsky recognized that effective learning precedes development.<sup>5</sup> However, our profession has been offered only two sharply opposed approaches to learning and processing information, neither of which recognizes the mutually responsive interactions that are fundamental to natural human learning in everyday life (Brown, Collins, and Duguid; Rogoff; Lave and Wenger; Forman, Minnick, and Stone).

Therefore, we believe it is time to begin a serious reappraisal of the teaching of grammar and offer a new vision beyond the dichotomy in approaches. We advocate a story-based and guided participatory approach (Donato and Adair-Hauck, "PACE"; Adair-Hauck, "Descriptive Analysis"; Adair-Hauck, Donato, and Cumo-Johanssen) that contrasts with both traditional explicit or implicit teaching. In many ways, this alternative approach can reconcile the explicit/implicit polarized views, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
**Story-Based and Guided Participation:**  
**An Alternative Approach to Grammar Instruction**

<i>Implicit Explanations</i>	<i>Guided Participation</i>	<i>Explicit Explanation</i>
Learners analyze the grammar explanation for themselves.	Teachers and learners collaborate on and co-construct the grammar explanation.	Teacher provides grammar explanation for learners.

### *Basic Principles of Story-based Language Teaching*

Before sharing a PACE lesson to focus on meaning and form (see the following article), we will discuss some basic principles of story-based teaching. Many specialists in first language literacy development have been exploring the implications of story-based language teaching for the past two decades. Likewise, researchers in cognitive psychology have been investigating guided participation in the areas of science, math, and social studies. Unfortunately, foreign language education has been lagging behind these other disciplines. First, we will discuss some basic principles of a story-based approach to grammar instruction, and then we will illustrate a story-based and guided participatory approach to focus on form within the context of a francophone story.

As early as 1976, psycholinguist Ken Goodman stated that “language is language only when it is whole” (qtd. in Fountas and Hannigan [134]). According to Goodman, the whole is always viewed as being greater than the sum of its parts, and it is the whole that gives meaning to the parts. In terms of grammar instruction, words, phrases, or sentences are not linguistic islands unto themselves; on the contrary, these linguistic elements only gain meaning when they are placed in context and used in conjunction with the whole: once students experience the whole, they are better prepared to deal with analysis of the parts (Fountas and Hannigan).

Goodman is primarily addressing the needs of first language learners. However, research in first language acquisition has often acted as a catalyst for theoretical advancement in second language acquisition, including the development of language literacy skills. For example, concepts such as the importance of comprehensible input, the role of interaction, and the notion of scaffolding in both motherese and caretaker speech are all derived from theories of first language development (Ellis, *Classroom*; Hatch; Hawkins). Furthermore, many second language specialists emphasize the importance of content-based instruction, authentic texts for listening and reading comprehension, and the need for connected discourse in grammar instruction (Celce-Murcia, “Grammar Pedagogy”; Nunan; Kramsch; Hughes and McCarthy), all of which emphasize the

importance of whole texts rather than fragmented speech in second/foreign language classrooms.

Conceptually, then, we need to reappraise our orientation to grammar instruction. Teaching approaches have all too often focused on fragmented discourse and artificial mechanical exercises. Many language programs stress a bottom-up or transmission approach by emphasizing the "bits and pieces" of language (word lists, verb conjugations, or isolated linguistic elements). A transmission, or language differentiation, approach, usually results in what Goodman calls "nonlanguage" which can be characterized as being unnatural, cognitively undemanding, and dull (Cummins). Moreover, words, phrases, or sentences do not take on meaning when viewed in isolation from each other; on the contrary, these linguistic elements only gain meaning when used in connected discourse forming a coherent whole. Therefore, if words take on their meanings only when used in connection to each other, students will need to experience whole contextualized language (stories, legends, poems, listening selections, cartoons, songs, recipes, etc.) with an emphasis on meaning-making and sense-making before a focus on form can be a productive instructional activity. In this way, a story-based language approach stresses natural discourse and encourages students to comprehend meaningful and longer samples of discourse from the very beginning of the lesson. Once students experience the whole, then they are better able to deal with the parts (Fountas and Hannigan; Adair-Hauck and Donato, "Méthode d'enseignement"; Adair-Hauck and Cumo-Johanssen; Hughes and McCarthy).

By introducing the lesson with a whole text, the teacher foreshadows the grammar explanation through the use of integrated discourse that will highlight the critical grammar structures to be taught. Galloway and Labarca explain that foreshadowing of new language elements is beneficial, for it provides "learners with a 'feel' for what is to come and can help students cast forward a familiarity net by which aspects of language prompt initial recognitions and later, gradually, are pulled into the learner's productive repertoire" (136). In this way, the story or text highlights the functional significance of the grammatical structure before the learners' attention is focused on form. This approach agrees with Ausubel, Novak, and Hanesian's idea of using advance organizers to assist the students by providing an "anchoring framework" for the new concepts to be learned.

A story-based and guided participatory approach invites the learner to comprehend and experience the functions and purposes of language through integrated discourse in the form of a story. This practice is in agreement with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (*Principles*), which stresses the importance of comprehensible input that "contains structures a little beyond our current level of competence" (21). As a result, from the very beginning of the lesson the teacher and learners are engaged in authentic

use of language through joint problem-solving activities and interactions to render the story comprehensible. By using pictures, mime, and gestures, the teacher scaffolds and guides the learners eventually to comprehend the story or other sample of connected discourse. Once comprehension is achieved, the teacher can safely turn the students' attention to various linguistic elements.

Since it is natural to tell stories orally, storytelling is particularly adaptable to second language instruction, stressing listening comprehension, followed by role playing and then reading and writing activities. Oller reminds us that the episodic organization represented in stories aids comprehension and retention. Furthermore, using "multiple passes" and recycling the story line through picture displays, Total Physical Response activities or role-playing scenarios deepens comprehension. The framework of the story provides a continuous flow of mental images that help the learner to assign meaning and functions to the forms they hear. After these initial activities and interactions have helped the learners to understand the meaning of the discourse, the teacher turns the learners' attention to specific language forms or structure. This approach is in agreement with Celce-Murcia's suggestion concerning grammar instruction for ESL learners, when she states that "one of the best times for them [the students] to attend to form is after comprehension has been achieved and in conjunction with their production of meaningful discourse" (301).

#### *Getting Started: Selecting a Story*

McWilliams suggests that, when selecting a story, it include these five critical components:

1. time and setting;
2. characters with a personality;
3. a major problem;
4. attempts to solve this problem with outcomes that build to a climax;
5. a quick resolution and ending.

Adair-Hauck has interviewed both first and second language teachers who have integrated story-based units into their classes, and the teachers concurred that the story should not be too long for second language learners. A three-to-five minute story is ample especially for elementary and intermediate level learners. Using visuals, the teacher needs to be able to narrate or tell the story, not read it, which is another reason that the story should not be too long. Therefore, elementary and intermediate level language teachers may have to abbreviate the text and/or simplify complex grammatical structures (e.g., tell the folktale in present tense to beginning level students). This strategy is in keeping with storytelling practices for native language speakers. For example, in English, the story

Peter Pan has been written with several versions depending on the audience—a simplified version with many visuals and simplified text for younger learners and a much more complete version with more colorful, poetic language for adolescent and adults. However, one should be careful when abbreviating or simplifying a story not to strip the text of its original richness and authenticity of language expression. To be sure, the five critical components listed above need to be embedded into the framework of the story. Please turn to the following article for a practical, hands-on PACE lesson in French.<sup>6</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>During the 1992–93 academic year, the authors, in collaboration with Philomena Cumo-Johanssen, Carlynton School District, conducted a three-month, classroom-based research study using a story-based/guided participatory approach to teach intermediate-level French students.

<sup>2</sup>We do not intend to denigrate textbooks or current instructional materials here. What we point out is that in many cases, the teaching of grammar, even in communicative and proficiency materials, is still highly explicit, teacher-fronted, and disconnected from actual language use. Part of this problem is in our own learning theories that dichotomize language acquisition from language use and participation in communities of practice from learning (see Donato, 2000; Swain, “Output Hypothesis”; Hall, “Aw Man”; and Sford)

<sup>3</sup>Over the past decade, much research has been conducted on how learners focus on form and internalize grammatical structures during peer interaction. This research holds promise for understanding the co-occurrence of language acquisition and use. However, in this article, we discuss exclusively the pedagogy of grammar and the teacher’s role in consciously incorporating grammar explanation into lessons.

<sup>4</sup>Vygotsky’s cognitive theory contrasts with that of Piaget, for whom speaking is a manifestation of an individual’s psychological development. For Vygotsky, communication via semiotic systems, notably language, is the vehicle through which individuals develop higher psychological processes.

<sup>5</sup>Work in this area is also rooted in activity theory developed by Leontiev. For examples of more recent research from an activity perspective, see Lave; Cole; Rogoff; and Newman, Griffin, and Cole.

<sup>6</sup>Both this article and the following one were partially funded by the University of Pittsburgh’s European Union and Center for West European Studies and the U.S. Department of Education (Title VI). Special thanks to Dr. Alberta Sbragia, Director of the Center of West European Studies.

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