Usage-Based Theory of Language and Usage-Based Instruction

Serafima Gettys, Lewis University, Romeoville, IL, USA

ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to describe Usage-Based Instruction (UBI), an innovative approach to teaching interpersonal communication in foreign languages. The UBI was inspired by Usage-Based view of language shared by such disciplines as Cognitive Linguistics, Cognitive Psychology, Construction Grammar, Usage-Based Grammar, and Artificial Intelligence. This approach has been used for a number of years by the Foreign Language Program at a small private Mid-Western university in teaching students to orally communicate in foreign languages in beginning foreign language courses. Students taught by the UBI demonstrate better performance, higher fluency, better accuracy and greater language gain than students taught by a more conventional, textbook-approach. In addition to this, they are more engaged in the learning process and consequently are more motivated to continue foreign language study.

KEYWORDS

Second Language Teaching, Teaching Speaking in Foreign Languages, Usage-Based Instruction, Usage-Based Model

INTRODUCTION

Ability to orally communicate in a foreign language is the goal most students pursue when they embark on foreign language study. The 2012 large-scale study conducted with the purpose of exploring college students’ personal goals in studying foreign languages showed that students prioritize the use of language in interpersonal communication and in communities, i.e., beyond school’s settings. In interpersonal communication, they mostly value conversations for the purposes of personal connection, i.e., primary discourses with family, friends, and even people in the streets and prefer it to professional discourse (Magnan, Murphy, Sahakyan, & Kim, 2012). In the meantime, recent studies show that efficiency of foreign language instruction for oral proficiency is generally low across the US (Davin, Rempert, & Hammerand, 2014; Moeller & Treiler, 2014) and that the majority of high-school students do not reach the target levels of oral proficiency.

This article comes from the premise that the origin of this somewhat disturbing situation is today’s dominant teaching paradigm which relies on traditional view of language, succinctly called by Tyler as “grammar + dictionary” view of language, which has not changed in spite of “the dizzying array” of methods that sprang up but largely failed in the 20th century foreign language pedagogy (Tyler, 2012). This traditional view holds that language is a set of rules, with words plugging into them. The pedagogical implication behind it is that in order for students to master a foreign language, they should know the rules and vocabulary and to learn how to work the latter into the former. In this
respect, Usage-Based Perspective is radically different from this view and offers a refreshingly novel view of how language works and how it is acquired, and, therefore, carries significant implications for foreign language methodology.

The article consists of four parts. In the first part of the article, readers, especially those not involved in foreign language education, will learn about the main features of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which today constitutes the mainstream approach to foreign language teaching. The purpose of this part is to create a backdrop for the second part of the article which will describe the main tenets of Usage-Based Model of language with their pedagogical implications while contrasting them with current teaching practices. The third part of the article describes the main principles laid in the foundation of the UBI. The article will conclude with the description of the UBI instructional sequence.

**TODAY’S DOMINANT TEACHING PARADIGM AND THE VIEW OF LANGUAGE UNDERLYING IT**

When asked what approach they employ in teaching foreign languages, most foreign language teachers will probably say that they use the ACTFL (American Council of Teachers of Foreign Language) endorsed communicative methodology or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Such extrapolation is based on the fact that most contemporary beginning foreign language textbooks carry the ubiquitous “Communicative approach” slogan in their titles. For a concise description of CLT, readers might be referred to Savignon (Savignon, 2013) or a more accessible publication about the main principles of CLT by Richards (Richards, 2006).

The rise of CLT dates back to the beginning of the 1970s when it was met with a great deal of hope and excitement by teachers disappointed in grammar-translation and audiolingual methods since they had largely failed to produce true ability to interpret, express and negotiate meaning in learners. According to Savingnon (Savignon, 2013), CLT is not just another method, but an approach that changed the goal of language education from learning language to the development of learners’ functional ability in using the language through communication. The main features of CLT include: focus on meaning and self-expression as opposed to formal features of language; focus on learner (e.g., course goals are identified in terms of learners’ communicative needs); functional-notional syllabus; focus on language as social behavior; assessments of what learners can do with the language and in terms of fluency, comprehensibility, and amount of communication in unrehearsed communicative tasks; engaging activities such as role plays, games, pair and group work; special attention to coping strategies; etc. It is not the goal of this article to evaluate the extent of consistency with which CLT is being transferred into classroom practice or how successful in is in reaching its goals. In what follows we will use it as a backdrop for our further observations of how language are taught today.

In spite of the CLT’s encouraging teachers to create their own instructional materials to meet the specific needs of learners, commercial textbooks have a very powerful presence in foreign language education. According to Norris (Norris, 2013) teachers heavily draw on textbooks: it is the textbooks that provide foundation for curriculum development, their content defines the content of the course, it is the textbook that is used as a resource for the majority of activities conducted in a classroom, and the pace of the course is usually identified in terms of textbook coverage. Even a quick look at current textbooks makes easy to discern the main characteristics of the above mentioned “grammar+dictionary” view of language.

According to this view, language is seen as divided into several distinct and largely disconnected elements – grammar, lexis, morphology, syntax, phonology etc. The separation of these components is especially pronounced in the distinction between grammar and vocabulary. Suffice it to say that textbooks usually have separate sections dedicated to grammar, on the one hand, and vocabulary, on the other.
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