

While We're on the Topic: BVP on Language, Acquisition and Classroom Practice

Book Review

by

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In *While we're on the topic*, Bill VanPatten (2017) challenges the teaching profession's approach to contemporary language teaching. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the overwhelming predominant approach to teaching second languages in the classroom today but VanPatten argues the profession has not really understood it and therefore, is failing to correctly use it. He is a passionate second language teacher and a firm believer in CLT but believes that because most teachers don't understand CLT nor how to use it, that the majority of second language teachers have simply overlaid communicative activities on top of an existing grammar and text-book driven curriculum and then get frustrated when learners don't develop communicative abilities. For true second language acquisition to work, he argues, there are certain fundamental principles of CLT that need to be adhered to, and which VanPatten goes on to develop in detail in his book. This book targets both new and experienced second language teachers and offers supporting research and concrete classroom ideas to offer a very provocative approach to second language teaching.

VanPatten structures his book around six essential CLT principles and dedicates a chapter to each one. Before diving in, he reiterates several times that just because you walk into a classroom and see mouths moving that it does not mean that genuine communication is taking place nor that language learning is occurring. VanPatten's six principles need to be taken as a whole in order to make sense. The first principle states that if one is going to base their teaching approach on a communicative approach then you need to make sure that you have a working definition of what communication actually is. Without this you cannot make decisions about what is appropriate in the classroom. VanPatten's second principle is that language is too abstract and complex to learn explicitly. That is, if the goal is communicative ability, then a second language cannot be taught in the same way as science or history. Third, VanPatten states

that Acquisition is severely constrained by internal factors which means that the traditional teaching approach of Presentation, Practice, Production is not the way to teach language. This principle leads directly into the next one, which is that instructors need to provide learners with the appropriate level of input and interaction so that level and quality of input are essentially at the core of the curriculum. The fifth of VanPatten's principles is that tasks, and not grammar exercises or activities from the text book are what is needed for communicative ability to really develop in the classroom. The sixth principle outlined in VanPatten's final chapter is that any focus on form needs to be input-oriented and meaning-based. He argues that teachers and textbooks and are in general overly preoccupied with teaching and testing grammar and unfortunately the majority of learners now also think that this is the way to learn a language.

In each of the book's chapters, VanPatten develops his six principles from which some very interesting and provocative ideas are raised. Many of these ideas challenge the contemporary approach to second language teaching in the classroom in a very significant way. At the same time, however, the ideas the book offers are quite inspirational and provide a range of research-backed definitions, approaches and concrete activities that look to alter the classroom from a focus on language practice to one that places the development of genuine communicative ability at its core.

First among these is VanPatten's notion of what communication actually is. Communication, he argues, is "The purposeful expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning in a given context," (VanPatten, p3). Essential to this definition then is that for communication to take place there must be a genuine attempt to express some kind of message or a genuine attempt to comprehend what is being said. In other words, there must be a purpose. He believes there are only two broad purposes that drive our need to communicate. The first is what her terms

psychosocial. This involves communication to affect, manage, and build relationships between people. The second purpose for communication is cognitive-informational. That is, communication driven by the need to learn how to do something; to know something; to obtain information about someone or something.

In everyday life, as we communicate, these two purposes often overlap. VanPatten argues that language and communication are not the same thing. He states that the majority of classrooms involve language practice, not real communication. Language is a tool for communication, he explains. A tool made up of words and rules. Most of the time in a language classroom is dedicated to practicing language, that is, answering questions pertaining to grammar or the rules and vocabulary of language. But this is not genuine communication. For true communication to occur there must be genuine expression and interpretation of meaning and either a psychosocial or cognitive-informational purpose. The reason this is important, VanPatten argues, is because the mind recognizes when we are involved in true communication and when that happens, the language acquisition processes in the mind are triggered and communicative ability begins to develop. On the other hand, language practice, the activity that lies at the core of most classroom curriculums, does not trigger these same acquisition processes in the mind. This is even the case when creating a cultural context of the train station and having learners role play in their conversations as they take turns purchasing tickets from the ticket counter. On the surface this seems like a terrific use of time the learners are involved in context-driven, practical conversations. However, VanPatten makes the case that even this type of activity doesn't help develop communicative ability because the mind still sees this as simple language practice and not true communication with meaning and purpose and therefore acquisition does not take place.

Another critical element to VanPatten's argument are the notions of input and interaction. Input, he states, is language that learners hear or see in a communicative context and then try to comprehend the message in it. To be input, it has to contain meaning. Much of the input we use in the classroom today, VanPatten states, is not really input in which learners need to purposely seek to comprehend meaning, but where they are simply repeating or practicing language. Unfortunately, VanPatten states that our language operating system was not designed to operate on language explanations or repetitions of phrases. It was designed in one way only: to respond to language embedded in a communicative event. That is, meaning within a psychosocial or cognitive-informational purpose.

Furthermore, students need to actively participate in events in which they receive input. Input has to be level appropriate. Students don't have to understand every word but if they don't understand the majority of what is being presented then they won't understand the meaning. What happens often is that input is simply added to an existing curriculum. VanPatten states that very often he'll see a typical first year units cover themes like the Family, weekend activities, school life, the weather, time and present tense verb groupings. Then what happens is instructors take new input ideas from CLT and simply overlay them on top of an existing curriculum without making any other changes. This is doomed to fail, he argues. Input, then, is the essential ingredient of language acquisition but even when we get it right, acquisition cannot be forced or taught explicitly like other subjects.

So what are we to do? What type of changes to their approach do language teachers need to make in order to make CLT successful? The answer he argues, is to move away from grammar and text-book exercises and activities and make tasks the backbone of a language curriculum. Many of the exercises we give our students do not really qualify as communicative. There is not

intent to express or comprehend meaning, nor no psychosocial or cognitive-informational purpose. If there is no purpose then the language acquisition process does not get triggered. Tasks, he believes, are the quintessential communicative event in the classroom. Tasks involve the expression and interpretation of meaning and tasks have a purpose that is not language practice. An example of a task that works in a classroom context is where students have to interview other students to get information. In a situation like this, students become more focused on the task than the language which means the mind sees them engaged in a genuine attempt to communicate and negotiate meaning. This is what develops communicative ability and not text-book driven exercises as they don't provide the mind with the kind of data it needs to trigger the language acquisition process.

Overall, I found this to be an excellent book. VanPatten makes a strong case that most of our instruction today is nothing more than language practice. This is fine if we are trying to learn about the rules and structure of language and aim to work or study as a linguist. But if the true goal is to develop communicative ability, then our curriculums need to be structured to be founded on tasks.

References

VanPatten, B. (2017). *While we're on the topic: BVP on Language, Acquisition and Classroom Practice*. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.