

Book Review

Book Review by Glenda Gartman, M.Ed. (ESL Methodologies)

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Bill VanPatten has put to rest any doubts concerning the importance of second language acquisition (SLA) theory and research to the classroom teacher with this excellent book on processing instruction: a new approach to grammar instruction based on what is now known about how students learn a second language. The first two chapters of the book are preparatory and provide the reader with a glossary of terms, a description and critique of traditional grammar instruction, a discussion of the role of input and intake in second language acquisition, and a model of second language input processing. Research data and theory from cognitive psychology and first and second language acquisition studies are discussed at length as a basis for the model.

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In the third chapter, VanPatten poses the question "If a traditional output-based approach to grammar instruction is incongruent with current theory about second language acquisition, then would an input-based approach to grammar instruction be better?" (p. 59). In answering the question, the author discusses the three basic components of processing instruction, using a sample lesson plan as illustration. Lesson components are: (a) explicit explanation of form/meaning relationships, (b) information about processing strategies, and (c) structured input activities. The author defines structured input activities as activities in which student attention is focused on form/meaning relationships as they **process** input. These activities do not involve **producing** the form in the manner of traditional grammar instruction. Instead, students indicate in a variety of ways that they are correctly processing a particular grammatical form in terms of its meaning. The author presents the reader with clear guidelines for creating structured input activities complete with examples, and concludes the chapter with a comparison of processing instruction and other approaches.

The first three chapters of VanPatten's book very persuasively answer the question posed in Chapter 3. It is convincingly argued that input-based grammar instruction is better than traditional instruction, "*but only if the instruction takes into consideration the nature of input processing* (p.59). The author emphasizes that processing instruction offers an alternative to traditional output-based grammar instruction, one that is based on sound psycholinguistic principles. The critical reader, however, may want more than a convincing theoretical argument and will find Chapter 4 of particular interest. The author discusses empirical data from five major studies of processing instruction. This emphasis on research distinguishes processing instruction from previous "innovations" in second language teaching that, although intuitively appealing, were seldom based on empirical evidence. The results of these studies consistently support the effectiveness of processing instruction, not only on the ability of students to process and interpret input, but also on their ability to produce targeted structures. These impressive studies also highlight areas in which future research should be conducted.

In concluding chapters, VanPatten discusses the challenges to and implications of processing instruction. Issues concerning the relationship of Universal Grammar and first language transfer to input processing are considered, and the role of processing instruction in the teaching of "meaningless" grammatical features is discussed. Additionally, the implications of research data demonstrating the effectiveness of processing instruction both in interpretation and production (despite the fact that such instruction is input not output based) are examined in terms of the model of language acquisition presented in Chapter 4. Finally, the author reiterates that processing instruction is a way of integrating non-traditional grammar instruction into a communicative approach to language teaching and emphatically distinguishes it from earlier no-instruction-in-grammar approaches based on Krashen's ideas of comprehensible input.

This exceptional book is an example of the importance of SLA theory and research in the field of second language teaching. The applicability of SLA theory is clearly demonstrated by the development of a new approach to grammar instruction that has been shown to be effective in empirical studies. The book demonstrates that, although the history of second language teaching has not been one of professionalism, professionalism in second language teaching is possible. Unfortunately, professionalism continues to be lacking in many schools and classrooms today. Perhaps books such as this one will initiate a change. If second language teaching is ever to be considered a profession, instructors must begin to base theory, methodology, and practice on informed knowledge of SLA and subsequent research evidence.