

# The Quest for Proficiency Begins with the Basics

CLTA 2018

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Input and More





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# And a Plug for After this Talk



# A Few Words About This Morning

- Some of what we will touch on you may already know or be familiar with.
- Some things will be new. Maybe a lot will be new.
- Some things will make your head spin.



# Seven Principles

- To teach communicatively requires a definition of **communication**.
- **Language** is too complex and abstract to teach and learn explicitly. AKA Language is not subject matter (like social studies or English lit).
- **Acquisition** is severely constrained by internal (and external) factors.
- One of the principal jobs of an instructor is to provide level-appropriate **input** and interaction.
- **Tasks** (and not activities or exercises) should form the backbone of the curriculum.
- Any **focus on form** should be input-oriented and meaning-based.
- **Assessment** should be about doing, not knowing.

# Principle 1



- How do you know something is communicative?
  - Because students are working in pairs: **not necessarily**
  - Because students are talking: **not necessarily**
- The root of the word *communicative* is the same as the root of *communication*. Thus, **to teach communicatively or to have a communicative activity implies a working definition of communication.**

# Communication

- So let's begin with a definition. Working with someone next to you, complete the following definition: "Communication is..."
- Communication is *the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning in a given context.*
  - **meaning** = information, propositional content, intent
  - **expression** = production
  - **interpretation** = comprehension
  - **context** = participants, setting, purpose
  - **negotiation** = clarification, confirmation, co-construction of discourse



# Communication



- How is communication context-dependent?
- [talking with his best friend at lunch]
  - Ricky: Hey. Here's a question only you can answer.
  - Friend: Shoot.
- [in a political science class]
  - Ricky [raising his hand]: Excuse me, Professor. I have a question.
  - Professor: Go ahead, Ricky.
- [with his romantic partner while watching a dvd at home]
  - Ricky [leaning in close, lowering his voice]: I have to ask you something.
  - Partner: Hmmmm?

# Communication



- But we're not done. People don't communicate just to communicate. Communication is always wrapped up in some kind of purpose.
- With someone next to you, describe what you think are the purpose or purposes of communication.

# Communication

- There are two main purposes to communication
  - psycho-social
  - cognitive-informational
- Are these purposes mutually exclusive in everyday life?



# Communication

**Teller:** Hi. How are you today? [psycho-social]

**Customer:** Just great, just great. And you? [psycho-social]

**Teller:** I'm great, too. Thank you for asking. [psycho-social] What can I do for you? [cognitive-informational and psycho-social]

**Customer:** I need to deposit this check. [cognitive-informational]

**Teller:** Do you have your bank card? [cognitive-informational]

(Customer shows the card. Teller begins to type into the computer.)

**Teller:** Any plans for this weekend? [psycho-social]

# Communication

- Because classrooms are **limited contexts**. A “full range” of **communicative events is impossible**. First, what do we mean by classrooms being limited contexts?
  - setting never changes
  - participants never change
- So, what kind of purpose of communication can we best build on when developing activities?
- So, we need to ask ourselves if our activities have any kind of communicative purpose: **if my activity does not have a cognitive-informational outcome (or some other real purpose), it is at best partially communicative and will be treated by students (and myself!) as language practice.**

# Communication

So what does it mean for an activity to have a cognitive-informational purpose?

- It means simply that we will use the information gathered during an interaction for the purpose of learning about ourselves and the world around us. We will create something based on the information we gathered during the activity.



# Communication

- What have I learned about you or me that I didn't know before and how does this fit into the world around us?
- What have I learned about the world around us?
- and so on

# Communication

- So, we can look at classroom activities as falling along a continuum:
  - **non-communicative**: no expression or interpretation of meaning
  - **partially communicative**: expression and interpretation of meaning but lacking in purpose (other than to practice language which is not a communicative purpose)
  - **fully communicative**: expression and interpretation of meaning plus some kind of purpose for communicating (usually cognitive-informational)



# So, Principle 1

- Here's the first principle: **teaching communicatively requires a definition of communication. That definition is....**
- Why is this important? This definition informs:
  - behaviors/classroom events
  - materials selection
  - expectations
  - assessment
  - how we talk to principals
  - how we talk to teachers and parents
  - everything!

# Application 1

- With this working definition you should be able to explain:
  - why classroom role play is not a communicative activity
  - how most (all?) activities in language textbooks aren't communicative
  - what it means for an activity to have a communicative purpose

# Communication and Principle 1

- To teach communicatively requires a definition of **communication**.
- This principle helps us to understand both the breadth and the limits of what can happen in a classroom. It also helps us understand purpose.

# Principle 2



- Language is something internal, not external. By saying that language is something internal, linguists mean that language is a **mental representation**. It has three major features:
  - Feature 1: Language is **implicit**.
  - Feature 2: Language is **abstract**
  - Feature 3: The components of language work in **complex ways** to yield what we call *sentences*.
- There are no “rules” in the traditional sense.

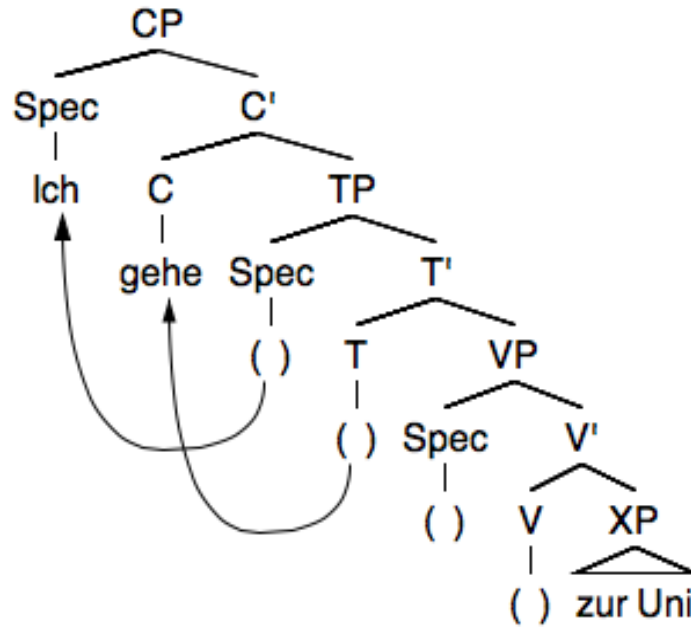
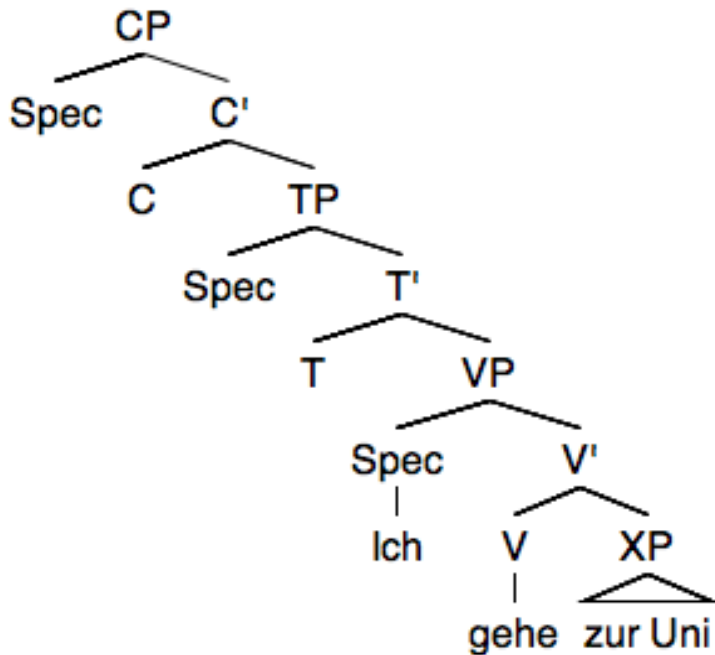
# An Example From Spanish

- “In Spanish, when the direct object is a person, it is preceded by the preposition "a." This word has no English translation. The personal "a" is not used when the direct object is not a person or is an animal for which no personal feelings are felt.”
- Now let's look at what's in someone's head
  - (1) *María conoce a Juan.* ‘Mary knows John.’
  - (2) *María conoce la materia.* ‘Mary knows the material.’
  - (3) *¿Conoces un buen médico?* ‘Do you know a good doctor?’
  - (4) *Tengo una hermana.* ‘I have a sister.’
  - (5) *El camión sigue al carro.* ‘The truck is following the car.’
  - (6) *El chico asustó al coyote.* ‘The boy scared the coyote.’

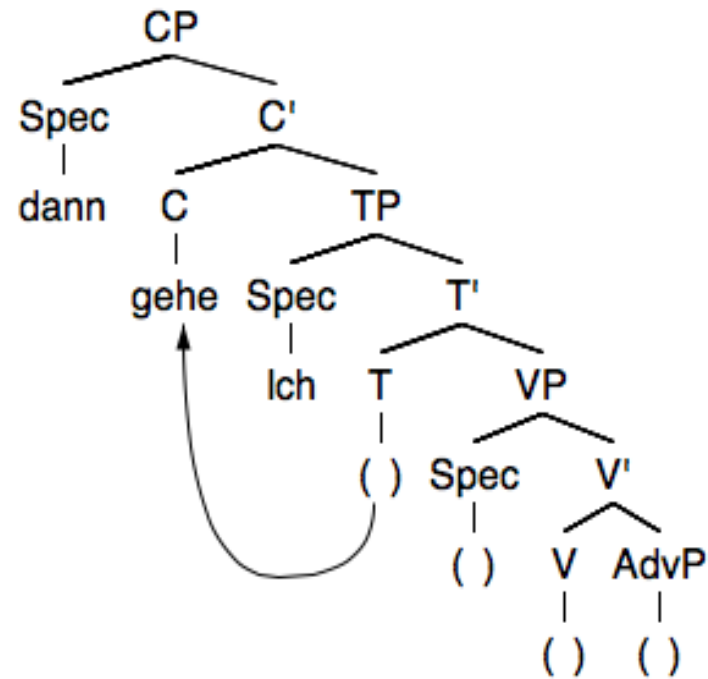
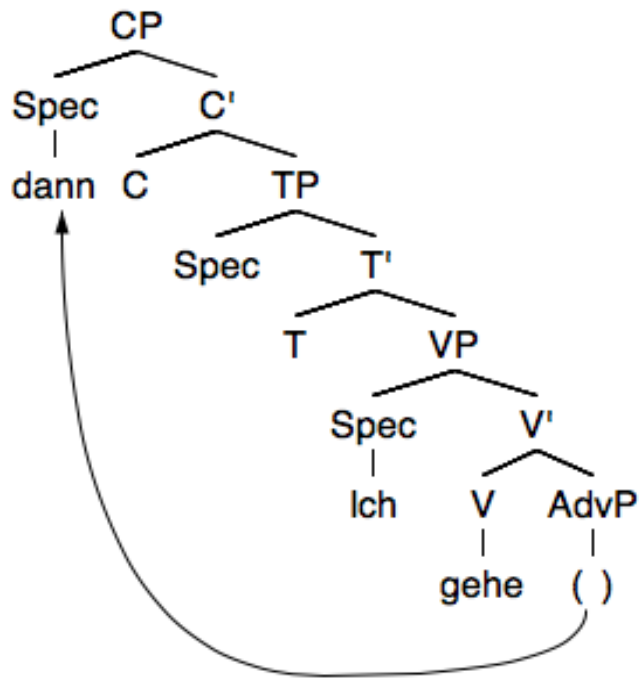
# An Example From German

- German: “In main clauses, conjugated verbs are always in second place. If an adverb appears in first position, then invert the subject and verb. In embedded clauses, the verb appears in final position.”
  - Ich gehe zur Uni. ‘I go to school’
  - Dann gehe ich zur Uni. ‘Then I go to school’

# An Example from German



# An Example from German





# Another Example

- In English you can contract *want to* to *wanna* and *I have to* to *I've*.
- I want to talk to you → I wanna talk to you.
- Who do you want to invite? → Who do you wanna invite?
- Who do you want to tell Tom the news? → \*Who do you wanna tell Tom the news?
- I have done it. → I've done it.
- Should I have done it? → \*Should I've done it?

# One Final Example

- Textbooks and teachers often talk about subjects as in: “Subjects and verbs must agree in Spanish (French, Turkish, Greek . . .).”
- What is a subject?
  - The captain ran a mile.
  - The captain wrote a memoir.
  - The captain hated the lieutenant.
  - The captain seemed sick.
  - The captain died.

# Language



- Here are some more
  - The captain sank the boat.
  - The boat sank.
  - The captain steered the boat.
  - ??The boat steered.
  - The captain torpedoed the boat.
  - \*The boat torpedoed.

# Language

- So what the heck is a subject? Wait there's more!
  - The dog chased the boy.
  - The boy was chased by the dog.
  - The Mayans built those pyramids.
  - Those pyramids were built by the Mayans.

# Language

- Still not done. . .
  - It's two o'clock.
  - There's fresh coffee.
  - *pro* Son las dos
  - *pro* Hay café fresco.



# Language

- So what is a “subject”?
- Here’s the generative response: *A subject is that nominal that occupies the Spec, TP of a sentence.*
- Other approaches offer definitions just as complex or abstract. Some don’t bother defining ‘subject.’ They simply assume what a subject is when talking about, say, SVO.

# So, Principle 2

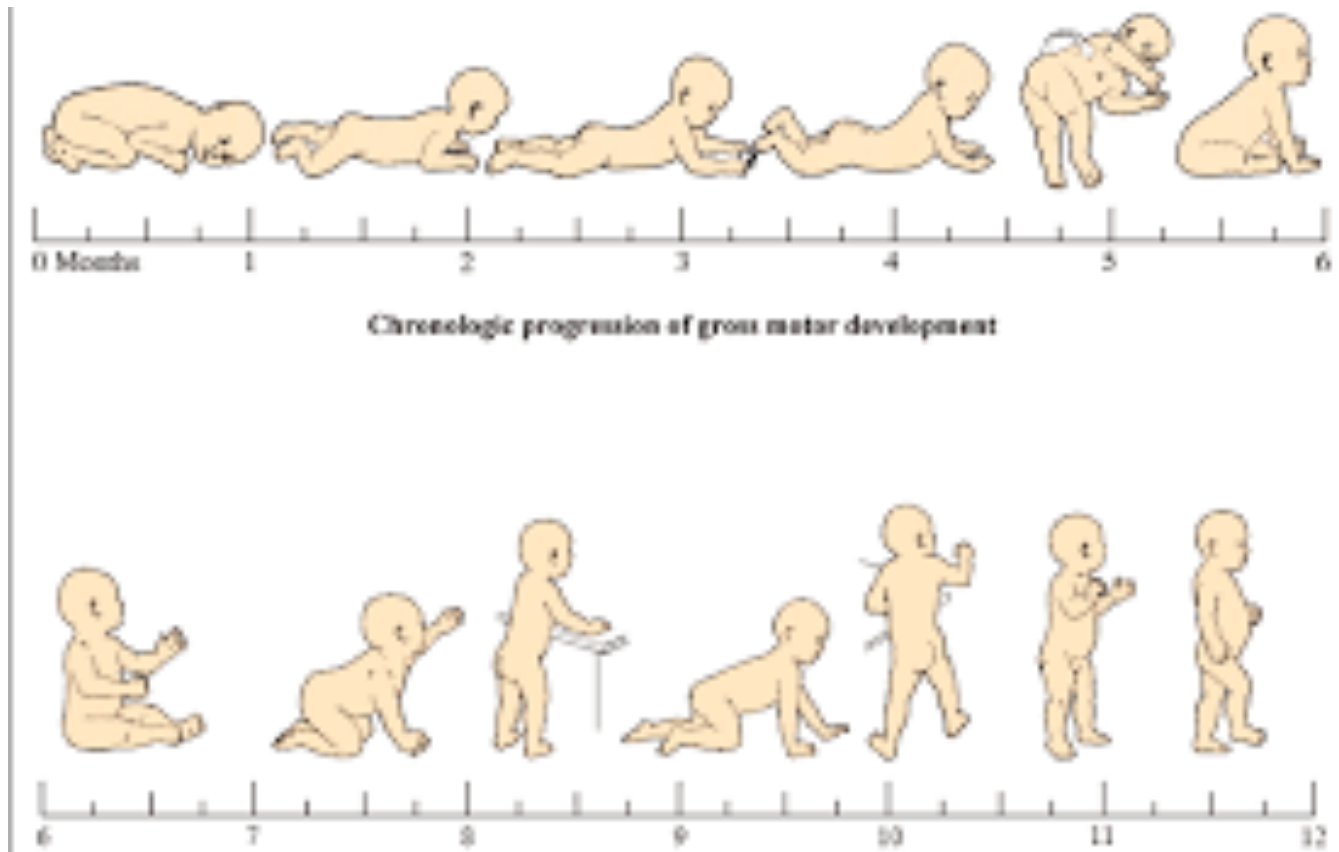
- Language is mental representation.
  - It is implicit.
  - It is abstract.
  - It is complex.
  - It does not consist of rules in the traditional sense of rules.
- Principle 1: Language is too abstract and complex to teach and learn explicitly.  
Language is not like other subject matter (e.g., history or biology).

# Application 2

- From what we have just reviewed, you should be able to state why the “grammar” on p. 32 of a language textbook is not psychologically or linguistically real.



# Principle 3



# Practice

- Does this look familiar to you? (from a recent college-level text)
- “Restate the question using inversion.”
  1. Est-ce que vous parlez espagnol?
  2. Est-ce qu’il étudie à Paris?
  3. Est-ce qu’ils voyagent avec des amis?
  4. Est-ce que tu aimes les cours de langues?
- What does the above suggest about language learning to teachers and students?



# Acquisition

- After four-and-a half decades of research on second language acquisition, one thing is clear: **practice does not make perfect**. In fact, languages are NOT learned by explicit teaching/learning + practice.
- In fact, we know these things:
  - acquisition is slow and piecemeal
  - language acquisition is stage-like and ordered
  - learners come to know (implicitly) more than what they are exposed to
  - non-nativeness is the norm
  - instruction does not circumvent any of these observations

# Acquisition

- Language acquisition is slow and piecemeal.
- Let's look at child language acquisition first.
- Here's the math: 8 hours x 7 days/week x 52 weeks x 4 years. The answer is close to 12,000 hours.
- Neither first language learners nor second language learners get a “particular thing” all at once.
  - For example, learners of both first and second languages don't first learn the present tense and then learn the past tense and then learn the future tense.
  - For example, first and second learners don't learn –ar verbs first, then –er verbs, then –ir verbs, then stem-changing verbs.

# Acquisition

- Ordered acquisition.
- Surface features of language are acquired in particular orders.
  - English: -ing → -ed → -s
  - Spanish: -o → -a on adjectives, singular → plural
- These orders take a long time for learners to move through.

# Acquisition

- Stage-like acquisition
- In the acquisition of a particular thing, learners go through stages. As in ordered development, stages can take a long time.
  - Stage 1: no verb. Learners simply leave it out as in *Juan alto* 'John tall' or *Mamá enferma* 'Mother sick'
  - Stage 2: emergence and use of *ser* for most contexts as in *Juan es alto* but the non-native *Mamá es enferma* (it should be *Mamá está enferma*)
  - Stage 3: emergence and use of *estar* as an auxiliary for progressive. Here the learner moves from such things as *Juan es correr* or *Juan es corre* ('John is running') to *Juan está corriendo*.
  - Stage 4: emergence and use of *estar* as copular verb with location and adjectives as in *Mamá está enferma* and *Mamá no está aquí* ('Mom is not here')

# Acquisition

DO YOU  
DO YOU  
DO YOU  
DO YOU  
WANNA  
DANCE?

- Learners come to know more than what they are exposed to
- Remember the *re-* test? Remember the *ain't* test?
- Here's another: *want to* → *wanna*, *have* → *'ve*
  - I want to go → I wanna go.
  - Where do you want to go? → Where do you wanna go?
  - Who do you want to invite on the trip? → Who do you wanna invite on the trip?
  - Who do you want to give the keynote speech? → \*Who you wanna give the keynote speech?
  - I have done it → I've done it.
  - I should have done it → I should've done it.
  - Should I have done it? → \* Should I've done it?

# Acquisition

- What does the research say about attempts to induce learning in students? What does it say about explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary? About explicit practice with vocabulary and grammar?
  - Instruction cannot alter stages
  - Instruction cannot alter ordered development
  - Instruction cannot make learners acquire things out of sequence
  - It's not clear that instruction even "speeds up" anything
  - It's not clear what instruction does, if anything



# Acquisition

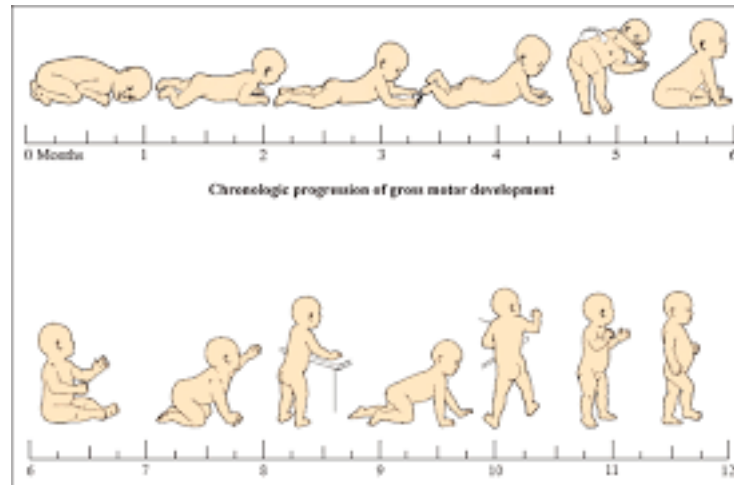
- What these and other observations suggest is that **there are powerful internal factors that guide, shape, and govern the nature of language acquisition.**
- These factors are **beyond the control of the teacher** or learner.
- What are these factors?
  - Universal grammar: e.g., features, principles and constraints
  - General learning mechanisms: e.g., frequency tabulator

# Acquisition

- There are also external factors that affect acquisition.
  - quantity of input
  - quality of input
- What's input? Input is...
- Input is language that learners hear or see in a communicative context. It is language they respond to for its message, for its meaning.

# So, Principle 3

- Our third principle is something like this: Acquisition is (severely) constrained by internal and external factors. Instruction can't circumvent this. Instruction is thus also severely constrained.



# Application 3

- Based on what we have just seen in Principle 3, you should be able to:
  - explain why the effects of traditional instruction are limited
  - explain why “practice” as it is normally understood does not lead to acquisition and to proficiency
  - state how the learner is in control of acquisition

# Wrap-up

- List five things you learned today that you did not know before.
- How do these things help you think about contemporary communicative language teaching?



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# In Memoriam

