

Key concepts in ELT

Noticing

In language classrooms, learners are surrounded by language from a variety of sources. As teachers we want to help learners make the most of this language, known as *input*, so that it enters their working systems and feeds into the learning process. Input which becomes part of the learning process is known as *intake*. In psycholinguistic research, there is a particular interest in the intake of grammar as a result of learners paying conscious attention to the input; this kind of intake is known as *noticing* (Schmidt 1990).

The idea of encouraging noticing in classrooms is hardly new, and language teachers have for many years worked with some form of the traditional presentation stage. Research is beginning to suggest ways in which we might improve upon tradition, encouraging us to think more systematically about how the classroom presentation of language might facilitate the noticing of language.

One interesting dimension here is explicitness. We may wish to make a feature of the grammar very explicit indeed to our learners, for example by providing overt metalinguistic explanations. Alternatively, we could make it very implicit, perhaps by marking a target form in a different colour in the text (see Sharwood Smith 1991).

As well as the text, it is also important to consider how the task encourages learners to engage with the input, since they very often manage to complete a presentation task without attending to the target form at all, so that designing tasks for noticing therefore means trying to focus learners' attention specifically on the target language (see Batstone 1994:100-3).

Noticing is a complex process: it involves the intake both of meaning and of form, and it takes time for learners to progress from initial recognition to the point where they can internalize the underlying rule. This argues for teachers to provide recurring opportunities for learners to notice, since one noticing task is most unlikely to be sufficient. More specifically, we may want to work with different kinds of noticing task in future in order to serve different psycholinguistic factors.

One such factor is the form/meaning distinction. Tasks which require simultaneous processing of

form and of meaning may overload the learners' system, leading to less intake rather than more (Van Patten 1990). Indeed, it is often argued that learners need to process meaning before they can go on to internalize form (Swain 1985: 248). So perhaps it makes sense to distinguish between tasks designed simply for noticing grammatical meanings, and tasks for making sense of form/meaning connections (Van Patten 1994).

Similarly, the cognitive load involved in noticing suggests that learners may need time to make sense of new language before they can make sense with it. In other words, it argues for receptive tasks to be clearly distinct from productive tasks, and for the former to precede the latter. Recent research suggests tasks which promote the premature production of language may be less effective than tasks encouraging the receptive processing of input (Van Patten 1994).

Research into noticing is still in its infancy, but given its importance as a gateway to language learning, it should be a subject of vital interest for all those involved in language teaching.

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