What is a "natural" approach? Or why is gradation and systemization necessary, even if it isn't "natural"?

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1 Introduction

Wilfried Decoo makes it clear from the outset what setting he has in mind when he talks about foreign language teaching: It is "the two-to- three 50-minute lessons a week given to adolescents caught between competing disciplines and who were, overall, not too motivated" (p. XVII). This is in fact the situation of the vast majority of language learners. Later, he aptly quotes Michael Swan's "3hpw learners", the three hours per week learners (p. 4). Decoo's efforts are clearly directed at improving the situation of the learner in regular non-intensive school programmes.

It is also the situation I found myself in when I started my teaching career at a grammar school and some years later at one of the first comprehensive schools in my country. Ever since, I have kept close and direct contact with secondary schools at first through part time teaching and later through visiting all types of schools and giving demonstration lessons – even in retirement. I feel that my academic work has profited enormously from these regular contacts, and it seems to me that the strength of Decoo's work lies very much in the fact that in the course of writing and re-writing of textbooks he must have regularly received most valuable feedback from the teaching front. Decoo seems to know what actually works in schools to improve learning and what not. Moreover, he proves to be an excellent historian of our discipline – as is also evident from his 2001 critical article on the "mortality of methods". Understanding this history, which is often misrepresented or ignored, prevents us from simplified and one-sided views.

It has long been my impression that many uncertainties and ambiguities of modern foreign language pedagogy stem from the fact of not taking into account classroom realities, i.e. the limitations of exposure-poor contexts. This impression

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has been confirmed by my reading of Decoo's cogent and persuasive plea for gradation and systemization in foreign language teaching. Planned sequencing and a structured content with regular calculated revision of the language material introduced is unavoidable in such a teaching-learning context.

But here lies a difficulty. In language learning, we all want to follow nature's blueprint. What is natural is good for us. What is unnatural is certainly not to be recommended. There is an underlying assumption that teaching should derive its principles from untutored natural acquisition situations (L1 and L2). And here is the crux of the matter: Natural language acquisition which is apparently so successful is clearly not to be seen as a progression planned and monitored by the environment. It doesn't follow a textbook. It doesn't seem to follow a lexical and grammatical syllabus imposed, and agreed upon, from the outside. There is constant revision of language, but without a master plan.

This, it seems to me, explains to some extent the disregard that a modern communication-driven pedagogy - the mainstream, probably - shows for lexical and grammatical systemization.

So let's tackle once more the complex question of what language teachers can learn from natural acquisition situations and where artful pedagogy must develop its own means and devices.

2 The critical mass hypothesis

A fundamental difference immediately springs to mind warning us of drawing easy parallels between classroom learning and natural acquisition situations: Nature needs huge amounts of contact time to achieve its wonderful job – something normal classrooms can never provide. Contact time furnishes the multitudinous examples of language expressions for the gradual discernment of recurring grammatical structure and lexical meanings.

Total immersion from nursery school on can perhaps provide the necessary amount of comprehensible input, even if 15 children share just one skilled speaker. But for the normal 3hpw learners, it would be hopeless to attempt to duplicate naturalistic environments in the classroom. From this point of view a "natural method" modelled on first language acquisition and on the immersion idea is an illusion.

L1 acquisition takes several years in which children hear millions of utterances. The preschool children of the Bristol Study (Wells 1981/1985) heard an estimated 5000 – 7000 utterances per day. Young children are attentive to what people are

saying perhaps 10 hours a day, or 70 hours a week. Contrast that with students who spend at the most a mere 5-6 hours a week in a conventional language class. Even granted the faster learning rate of older children, classrooms can never provide enough exposure for the learners to sort out the many bewildering complexities of a language by themselves. Mere exposure to the FL does not lead to learning, simply because there's never enough of it. The evidence they get is too slender for them to extract patterns and extrapolate rules and to pick up and retain words through incidental learning (see Decoo p. 114ff.). As Butzkamm & Caldwell (2009, p.30) have pointed out there are, apart from the limitations of time, other important handicaps teachers have to cope with, where classrooms radically differ from natural acquisition situations:

- Fifteen to thirty learners have to share one mature, accomplished speaker, whereas in families communication with the infant is usually one-to-one.
- The new language cannot really be lived: it cannot be used while eating, cooking, going shopping or quite generally doing things where the meaning clearly springs from the situation at hand.
- There is no urgency behind FL use because there is always another language to fall back on to satisfy immediate communicative needs.
- Never can the FL become the medium of intimacy and love to the extent that the MT quite naturally is in child-parent interactions. Parents greet new words with delight and actively encourage their child to go on talking.
- There is a strong urge for pre-puberty children to identify with adults. They want to be (and to speak) like them.

So no matter what we do, there is a dearth of comprehensible input from, interaction with, and feedback from mature speakers, a dearth for which we have to find some sort of compensation.

3 More is not just more, more is different

In addition to these six handicaps there is still another powerful factor, largely ignored, which makes exposure-poor classroom learning different from first language learning, and to a lesser extent, from second language learning in the street. It is related to the first handicap, i.e. lack of exposure to comprehensible input and lack of contact time in general.

In terms of individual open-class words, more may be just more, but not in terms of fluent articulation, phrases and constructions. As Butzkamm & Caldwell (2009, p.168) explain, in skill learning, more isn't just more. Quantitative differences

become qualitative ones because entirely new properties emerge. This has always been evident to teachers as they compare the beginner who tries hard to get it right, with the fluent productions of the skilled performer. Repetition leads to smoother and less redundant movements in the execution of the skill. Performance changes through repeated practices, because the organism ceases to respond at the same level to a repeated stimulus. In the process called re-structuring (also: chunking, habituation) the organism learns to anticipate and "short-circuit", or "prune":

> Pruning is the elimination of necessary clutter and a clearing of the way for more material to enter the cognitive field… Cognitive pruning is an important consideration in the automatising stage of language learning. In the early stages, certain devices (definitions, paradigms, illustrations or rules) are often used to facilitate subsumption. We can regard these devices as initially meaningful. But in the process of making language automatic, the devices can serve as interim entities … and then be systematically pruned out at later stages of learning. (Brown 1972, p.220)

Information on details, for instance on individual sounds, drops away and attention can be re-directed to higher-order events. When we listen, individual sounds and words disappear into whole rhythmic groups associated with meaning, the advantage being that the chunks come at a slower pace and so are easier to perceive. Achieving fluency thus means doing things differently, not only faster. Speech production thus becomes elegant and economical.

Quantity turns into quality, which is also true for grammar. With time, the brain reorganizes information into schemata and super-schemata. Words merge into larger units and grammatically organised phrases or chunks. Step by step, young children will tackle the more complex things later when they are ready for them and their memory capacity has expanded. They make increasing use of forms and meanings they already master to acquire more language, until they arrive ultimately at an adult grammar. It is what teacher and textbook also do but quite differently when they grade their materials and introduce new words and structures in small packages. Young developing brains accomplish their own sequencing of the learning tasks before them – something which cannot simply be copied in classrooms. There are natural acquisition orders or developmental sequences which come about in a process psycholinguists have called entrenchment. Seen from this angle, any FLT approach which claims to be natural and analogous to first language learning turns out to be an impossibility.

The input we receive from parents and other mature speakers never consists of abstract syntactic categories and schemas. All we hear is concrete sentences and particular words. The schemas, then, have to be extracted. Children must learn

how to discern the kind of underlying patterns and transfer structures across verbs in order to build sentences of their own. But for this to happen they need sufficient experience with a given construction. They must encounter a large number of significant examples. Take, for instance, the use of articles. Articles must be used repeatedly and significantly and are thus felt rather than understood intellectually.

Our brains have a capacity for "statistical learning". Our internal mechanisms begin to connect formal features and the meanings they encode and thus construct the learner's developing linguistic system. As evidence for certain form-function pairings accumulates, the system eventually "knows". "Generalizations come only after a fair amount of concrete linguistic material has been learned" (Tomasello 2003, 98.) It is a process that takes place over many childhood years. (Unless of course we already possess some basic syntactic structures as a part of our genetic heritage. This is the Chomskyan tradition of a universal grammar which is now rejected by most researchers).

4 Systematic grammar teaching and the role of L1

This leads us to grammatical grading. The role of grammar is a minefield, and highly controversial. Decoo (p. 151) pleads for a "'curricular order' that matches, as well as possible, both a natural order of acquisition and the most favorable didactic sequencing". Well, yes, but, of course, easier said than done.

Here I propose the following. In our teaching texts even for beginners we can largely ignore grammatical grading and thus be more authentic and "natural". However, explanations and systematic presentations such as conjugation tables should still come in an ordered sequence at their proper place (which of course is not "natural"). I'm presently trying out grammatically ungraded dialogues and sketches with primary school children in grade 4. Here are three typical dialogues I used:

(1) Head boy / head girl

Tim: Head boy, me?
         I can't do that.

Pam: Why not?
         I'll support you.
         We'll vote for you.

Tim: But think of the work.
          Think of the responsibility.

Pam: Think of the power!

Tim: I'll do it!

(2) Picasso junior

Tim:
I've got a C for my drawing.
It's unfair.
I tried as hard as I could.

Tom:
Let me see.
Hmmm. I don't know what to say.
It looks kind of …simple.
I think I could do it in five minutes.

Tim:
Exactly.
Picasso sometimes needed less than that.
And he used beermats.

Tom:
I see. You're a genius!

(3) Is she pretending?

Jane:
Mummy, my head aches, my throat hurts.
I think I should stay in bed!

Mummy:
Have'nt you got an English test today?
I think you should go and take the test.

Jane:
Mummy, I'm not pretending.
I'm suffering.

I'm dying!

Mummy:
Oh well, darling, I'll make you a herbal tea.

I wonder how an experienced textbook author like Decoo would react to these texts which I used without giving much thought to lexical and grammatical grading! The naff content of many teaching texts could be due to an overemphasis on lexical and grammatical grading. This in turn is a side-effect of a monolingual approach. We must carefully grade our language material if we want to explain things monolingually. For instance, by means of a calendar the days of the week are presented monolingually. Only then is the class ready for the past tense: Teacher: "Today is Monday. Yesterday <u>was</u> Sunday. We <u>went</u> to…" etc. Here the monolingual approach is a straightjacket for both teacher and textbook author. This is why, in my opinion, the conventional type of grammatically graded texts seriously underchallenges beginners. Why not use a future or a past tense form, *do*-negation or interrogation etc. in the very first English dialogue? Didn't we all learn the ideas of past and future time roughly at the age of three? My primary school children can easily handle *will, may, should* or constructions such as *for plus noun plus to-infinitive*, etc., i.e. forms and functions that are usually offered later in the course. Authentic texts such as *Yellow Submarine* are easily accessible: "In the town where I was born lived a man who sailed the sea…": passive voice, past tense, relative clause: no problem. Because both lexical and grammatical meanings are conveyed effortlessly via the sandwich technique and the mirroring technique, i.e. via the mother tongue (Butzkamm & Caldwell 2009), my primary children have no problem handling such songs as well as the above sketches. Decoo addresses the problem of "authentic" in a short passage which includes ca. 20 references to relevant literature and concludes with Gilmore (2007): "The debate over the role of authenticity, as well as what it means to be authentic, has become increasingly sophisticated and complex over the years." (p. 302). Well, if you ask me, common sense is enough to deal with this problem…

Grammatically ungraded dialogues or sketches easily exploit the communicative creativity and sophistication which all children possess in their mother tongue: They can cajole, comfort, flatter, lie, protest, regret etc. just as we do. (Decoo, p.227: "Most learners master these functions naturally in their mother tongue." I couldn't agree more!) In fact, they enjoy giving the sketch a personal voice and a personal presence by acting it out in their own fashion. If rightly taught, the sketches will be performed with verve and gusto. And they equip the children with useful phrases and productive patterns which they can adapt to their own communicative needs. This what they want: the language of human relations. But what most primary children usually get is names of colours, numbers, pets, farm

animals and animals in the zoo. In the actual teaching practice, at least, the main focus seems to be on individual words.

5 Languages: unity in diversity

As Decoo (p.150) rightly points out: "In second-language learning, however, the concepts are known beforehand." And this is why the mother tongue can function as the magic key that unlocks the doors to foreign language grammar.

All languages essentially dance the same dance.

Ethnographers and anthropologists have entertained us with amusing stories of quaint cultural practices. They are real, no doubt, as real as the differences between languages. For instance, we are interested in the rites, simple or elaborate, quaint or less quaint, developed in many of the world's cultures, to predict the future. Ways, basically, of asking the gods. At the same time we ignore what is common to these practices and beliefs. I mean the apparently universal human need to see into the future, to decipher what is ahead of us, what is to come, in order to help us make the right decisions. We tend to overlook that there is a common ground here, just as we overlook the core concepts behind the various expressive devices of different languages. Most, if not all, languages have developed ways of stating, negating, asking for information, they have developed means of expressing ideas such as possession, location in place and time, amount, agent or doer, instrument, possibility, causality etc. By the time they go to school, children have heard thousands of if-clauses, so popular with parents. So they know quite a lot about setting conditions and negotiating them. And because of these common core concepts, because of this unity in diversity we can map languages onto each other, no matter how differently they express these ideas. So we can make correspondences and map the familiar onto the new and unfamiliar or mirror the foreign construction in the familiar idiom. "Mirroring" or *Spiegelung* is a kind of literal translation, where the syntactical patterns of the target language are demonstrated through reordering the mother tongue pattern to match the foreign language pattern (e.g. for anglophone learners of German: *Heute bin ich angekommen –* * *Today am I arrived*).

It was great to find that Decoo is very open-minded with regard to the much debated issue of the role of L1 in foreign language teaching (p 156ff.). His reference to Michel Thomas who "proceeds on the basis of similarities between L1 and L2, in a daring mix" (p. 158) pleased me a lot. The same holds true for his mentioning Meijer (1974), an important empirical study of over 350 pages which came out in Amsterdam and was written in Dutch (albeit with an English summary), and which no one seems to know. Publish in Dutch and perish. (In

Butzkamm 1980 I devoted seven pages to Meijer's Nijverdal experiment – with no response from the teaching profession. Publish in German and perish. Regrettably, Meijer died only a few years after his book came out). I also recognized the reference to Henry Sweet (p. 158), who stresses the importance of cognate and borrowed forms and the principle of association, *das Mitlernprinzip* (Butzkamm 2007, 122ff.) While it is common practice to associate new items with known items within the foreign language, the mother tongue, the learners' greatest treasure house of words, is often excluded in linking the new with the old and building networks. The monolingual doctrine is clearly to blame for this.

6 Conclusion

In our attempts to improve the teaching of foreign languages in our schools it is inescapable that we should have a close look at natural acquisition situations. Understanding the mysteries of successful language acquisition in the crib and in the streets will contribute to our understanding of how the mind works. But we should never forget that the situation of the 3hpw learner is far from natural. The motto Decoo found for his book is aptly chosen: "The possibility of presenting content systematically is certainly the most important factor in compensating for the lack of a natural situation in foreign language learning" (Jan van Ek). Beware of didactic Rousseauism! In teaching, nature must be tempered with artifice. This reflects the "*natürliche Künstlichkeit*" which, according to the philosopher Helmuth Plessner, characterizes the human condition in general.

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