Chapter 12

Teaching

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In this chapter one of the key contributions of Processability Theory to classroom applications is introduced: Teaching a foreign language is constrained by the PT hierarchy. This claim is known as the "Teachability Hypothesis" introduced by Pienemann in 1984. This chapter summarizes the Teachability Hypothesis and discusses the role of input and output in foreign language classrooms from a PT perspective. The chapter concludes with a discussion of developmentally moderated approaches to foreign language teaching and shows that PT supports innovative approaches to focus on form and TBLT.

1. Introduction

In 1984 Allwright asked the following question: *Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?* Allwright's question summarized the suspicion of many researchers: the acquisition of a foreign language in the classroom might follow a path similar to the developmental sequences found in natural acquisition of the same language. Pienemann (1985, 1989, 1998) and many others (e.g. Mansouri & Duffy 2005, Pienemann, Keßler & Liebner 2006; Keßler 2006b) provided empirical evidence supporting this idea.

Twenty-seven years later, Allwright's question is still relevant. However, with the availability of an L2 profiling procedure (cf. Chapter 11) and L2 developmental scales we can reverse Allwright's question: *Why don't teachers teach what learners can learn?* (cf. Keßler 2006c).

It has been known for more than two decades that classroom learners follow the same developmental sequences as naturalistic learners. Yet the textbooks that are in use in most EFL classrooms neither reflect the sequences (cf. Pienemann 1985; Keßler

2006a, Lenzing 2008), nor do they offer any opportunity to address the individual learner's current stage of development (Keßler 2006b, 2008b).

In this chapter, we advocate an approach in which teachers tweak their syllabi according to their learners' states of interlanguage development. This chapter is divided into three parts. Section 2 briefly summarizes the basic idea behind Pienemann's Teachability Hypothesis, which was later integrated into the general framework of Processability Theory. We also give a brief overview of research which has tested the Teachability Hypothesis. In part three, we will discuss implications of PT for the treatment of learner errors and feedback. The chapter concludes by discussing approaches to developmentally moderated L2 instruction.

2.   The Teachability Hypothesis

The key issue is whether teaching can alter the sequence of acquisition. In 1984, Pienemann put forward the Teachability Hypothesis which states that:

> "… instruction can only promote language acquisition if the interlanguage is close to the point when the structure to be taught is acquired in the natural setting (so sufficient processing resources are developed)".   (Pienemann 1984: 37)

In other words, the Teachability Hypothesis defines constraints on the effects of formal instruction. Long (1988) summarized the idea in a nutshell: "You can't skip stages". The Teachability Hypothesis follows logically from the nature of developmental sequences (cf. Chapters 1, 3 and 4): since each developmental stage requires the processing procedures developed at the previous stages, it is not possible to skip a stage (through formal intervention or any other means).

Given that learners follow their own internal syllabus regardless of the teaching process, Pienemann (1989: 53) recommended that second language instruction "… build on the learning processes occurring outside the classroom and incorporate them systematically into … [formal] acquisition".

The concept of teachability is also connected to the discussion of "developmental trailers" (Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991; Pienemann 1998). For most stages of development, several structures have been identified (cf. Chapters 1–4). One might argue that all structures related to one stage need to emerge when they are processable. However, this is not necessarily the case. Pienemann (1998: 250) argues that "… there is no reason to assume that learners will acquire a structure just because they can process it. A functional need would have to be present for the structure to emerge". In other words, learners are developmentally ready to acquire the developmental trailer. However, developmental readiness does not guarantee acquisition.

A number of studies have been undertaken to test the Teachability Hypothesis. In a study of 10 learners of German as a foreign language (L1 Italian), Pienemann demonstrated that learners were not able to move from Stage x to Stage x+2 through intensive instruction, even if learners in the same class who were developmentally ready for x+2 did develop from x+1 to x+2. In other words, he demonstrated that teaching cannot beat the natural order of acquisition. Other empirical tests of the Teachability Hypothesis were conducted by Ellis (1989), Boss (1996), Dyson (1996), Mansouri & Duffy (2005), Keßler (2006a and 2006b), Pienemann, Keßler & Liebner (2006), Elsner & Keßler (2011).

In addition to the experimental studies shown in Table 12.1, several studies (e.g. Pienemann 1985, 1989, Pienemann, Keßler & Liebner 2006; Keßler 2006b and 2011) were conducted which demonstrated that the developmental schedules were identical in natural and classroom SLA – independently of (and in contrast to) the syllabus the learners were exposed to. The brief overview of the findings of teachability studies presented in Table 12.1 shows that overall experimental evidence supports the notion of developmental constraints on foreign/second language learning.

Table 12.1. A brief overview of teachability studies

Study	TL	Learners' L1	Design	Findings
Pienemann (1984)	German	Italian	Pre-test, Post-test control group design: whether stages can be skipped	Stages of acquisition cannot be skipped (Formulation of Teachability Hypothesis).
Ellis (1989)	German	English	Pre-test, Post-test control group design: formal versus naturalistic instruction	Support for the Teachability Hypothesis
Boss (1996)	German	English/ Chinese	Oral language production compared to taught syllabus as opposed to PT sequence	Learners progressed in the predicted order regardless of the taught syllabus
Spada and Lightbown (1999)	ESL	French	Pre-test, Post-test control group design: whether stages can be skipped	Inconclusive: no support for Teachability Hypothesis[1]
Dyson (1996)	ESL	Spanish	Longitudinal study of ESL development with a syllabus based on teachable forms	Overall support for the Teachability Hypothesis despite individual learner variation
Mansouri & Duffy (2005)	ESL	Chinese/ Korean/ Thai	Pre-test, Post-test control group design: developmental versus reversed order group	Support for the Teachability Hypothesis

1.   This study was inconclusive because the informants had already acquired the test structure in the pre-test. Also, the study is based on the false assumption that the Teachability Hypothesis predicts that "timed intervention" will promote acquisition (Pienemann & Keßler in press).

3. Input and output in foreign language teaching

Let us briefly look at the role of input in foreign language learning in the context of PT. This implies two aspects: (1) a developmentally moderated approach to input, and (2) the role of PT in error correction (i.e. handling output).

As any foreign language classroom is at least somewhat heterogeneous (cf. Keßler 2008b), only full and rich input can support all learners within the classroom in acquiring those target language structures that they are ready to integrate into their current state of interlanguage development. At the same time, teacher input can be fine-tuned to support individual learners according to their individual levels of interlanguage development. Teachers who are familiar with the interlanguage profiles of their learners (cf. Chapter 11) can provide input with carefully chosen target language structures tailored to a particular learner who is ready for them.

Let us exemplify this with an EFL structure relating to the acquisition of question formation. As can be seen in Chapter 1 in Table 1.1, L2 English question formation starts at Stage 2 by extending the use of the SVO pattern to question formation, indicating the interrogative mode by a rising intonation. Stage 3 questions basically maintain the SVO-pattern, with the learner now adding an element before the canonical SVO pattern.

(1)   What you want?
(2)   When Peter come?
(3)   Why the boy not happy?

All these examples show interlanguage structures which differ from the target language. Of course it would be counter-productive to include these ungrammatical structures in the input provided by the teacher (cf. Pienemann 1983). However, structurally similar questions, which follow exactly the same X-SVO-? pattern, can be provided by the teacher to support the acquisition of this stage in EFL-question formation:

(4)   Can I go home?
(5)   May she ask you a question?

Example (4) and (5) also follow the X-SVO-? pattern. However, they are target-like realizations of this structure. Providing this kind of input will thus enable learners from Stage 2 to be ready to move to the next stage.

A second PT-related aspect of input provided by the teacher is error correction. An analysis of learner errors from a PT perspective first of all needs to distinguish between developmental and variational errors (cf. Keßler 2006b). Developmental errors occur because the learner attempts to express something that he or she cannot yet process in the current state of interlanguage development. Variational errors occur

because of the choices learners make when they try to resolve developmental problems (cf. Chapter 5).

Applying these concepts to error correction, we conclude that not all learner errors should be treated in the same way. In contrast to early approaches to the so-called communicative foreign language classroom, which invited teachers to neglect errors as long as the message the learner wanted to convey was understandable, a PT-based approach to error correction would not follow the idea *anything goes*. Depending on the type of error, the slogan *message before accuracy* may be harmful for further L2 development. Let us look at the following examples, each produced by a stage 3 learner of EFL:

(6) Peter go home.
(7) He nice guy.

Sentence (6) provides an example of a developmental error: the morphological structure required in a target language version of this sentence would be "3-sg-s". This structure is not acquired until Stage 5 on the PT hierarchy for EFL (cf. Chapters 1 and 4). A learner who is still at Stage 3 is not yet developmentally ready to acquire this structure; thus, this structure can neither be taught nor learned by this learner at this point in time. Correcting the learner would not lead to any success in the acquisition process, as the learner may be able to repeat the target-like form of this structure after having been corrected by the teacher, but he or she would make the same error again as soon as another context for 3-sg-s occurs. However, providing corrective feedback by the teacher might be beneficial for other learners in the same classroom who may already have acquired Stage 5 and can comprehend and process the corrective feedback provided by the teacher. (e.g. Mansouri & Duffy 2005; Keßler 2007; Di Biase 2008.)

Sentence (7), on the other hand, is an example of a variational error. This is a straightforward SVO structure which is acquired at Stage 2 (cf. Chapters 1, 3 and 4). As mentioned above, the learner in our example has reached Stage 3, so he or she is able to process SVO structures. In Chapter 5, we discussed the concept of variation from a PT perspective and introduced the notion of hypothesis space. Looking at (7) more closely shows that the learner makes an error by choosing an omission strategy for his interlanguage production. Instead of producing a complete SVO structure including the verb, the learner in our example produces an incomplete SVO structure, leaving out the copula verb.

From a *message before accuracy* point of view, this sentence could be considered acceptable. From a PT perspective, however, it would be rather problematic not to correct this error. As discussed in Chapter 5, the omission strategy may lead to a simplified interlanguage. We demonstrated that simplified choices may accumulate and result in simplified interlanguage variation. In our example, the acquisition of the copula is vital

for the learner's further development in EFL. Without having acquired the copula at an early point in the acquisition process, the learner will not acquire copula inversion as required at Stage 4. Thus, not correcting this error may lead to a simplified variety (cf. Chapter 5, Figure 5.5) in interlanguage development, which may result in stabilization (cf. Long 2003; Pienemann 2006).

4. Developmentally moderated approaches to the foreign language classroom: Focus on form and TBLT

So-called "wonder methods" (cf. Long 2000: 179), which declare to have found the holy grail of second language teaching, have frequently appeared in the past. A closer look at the history of Second Language Teaching reveals that there is no best teaching method. Nevertheless, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Long 1985; Ellis 2003; Nunan 2004) is a promising approach to language teaching for a number of reasons, not least because there is strong theoretical support for it (Long & Crookes 1992, Doughty & Williams 1998; Keßler 2006b and 2008b; Keßler & Plesser 2011).

TBLT relies on the concept of *Task* instead of *Exercise* as the central teaching basis. Since its introduction, more than twenty definitions of tasks have been proposed (for a list see Ellis 2003 and Keßler & Plesser 2001). Naturally, there is no agreement as to how to define a task. However, at the most basic level, a task can be considered as a meaningful activity amongst learners which is not fixed in its outcome (cf. Long 1985).

Teaching methods and their syllabi can be subdivided into two categories: analytical and synthetic (Long & Crookes 1992). In synthetic approaches to language teaching, language is cut into bits and pieces. It is the learner's job to acquire them in a discrete manner, one bit at a time. After having attempted to learn these discrete grammatical structures, the learner is expected to re-synthesize (Long & Crookes 1992) these language bits into meaningful language. Quite often, learners fail to do so; in heterogeneous classrooms, classical exercises often do not lead to interlanguage development for all learners (cf. Keßler 2009).

This fact can be illustrated by the following example. The syllabus of a language course schedules the teaching and learning of questions of the type Aux-2nd for a given point in time. This structure can only be acquired by students who have already mastered structures at Stage 4 of the PT-Hierarchy (as the Teachability Hypothesis predicts). Several studies have shown that a regular school class is quite heterogeneous in relation to the students' level of acquisition (e.g. Keßler 2008b, 2009; Keatinge & Keßler 2009). In our example, all learners who are below Stage 4 of the PT-Hierarchy will not acquire the structure.

There is a strong connection between PT as an L2 acquisition theory and TBLT as the method of instruction in the second language classroom (Keßler 2008b,

Keßler & Plesser 2011, Pienemann & Keßler in press). In contrast to communicative approaches, where the focus is on meaning, and traditional approaches like the Grammar-Translation Method, where the focus is on discrete grammatical structures (also called Focus on FormS (Long 1991)), TBLT supports Focus on Form. Di Biase (2002 and 2008) developed the form-focused approach further by focusing on those linguistic structures the learners are ready for (for further detail see Keßler & Plesser 2011).

Focus on Form in conjunction with developmental readiness can be seen as a compromise between Focus on FormS and Focus on Meaning. While the overall focus of a lesson is on meaning and on communication, learner's attention is frequently shifted towards linguistic elements (cf. Long 1991) when the learner faces a communicative problem in a task. This developmentally moderated focus on form has the potential to be integrated into second language learning programs. In order to account for individual learners in a communicative EFL classroom, Keßler (2008b) suggested the Diagnostic Task-Cycle in which the teacher first uses profiling tasks in order to identify the individual levels of developmental readiness of the learners, followed by various applications of tasks in a pre-, during- and post-task manner (for details see Keßler 2008b).

The pedagogical tasks can be strung together in such a way that they consider the developmental readiness of the learner. A syllabus designer would then have to pay attention to obligatory and optional structures to be used in a task. An example helps to illustrate this concept: let us consider a Habitual-Action Task. Pictures of a boy and his activities during a normal school day are shown to a learner. In order to complete the task and describe the boy's activities during the day, the learner needs to make reference to use the Simple Present will have to produce 3-Sg-s. This task can readily be used to test whether a learner has acquired Stage 5 (3-Sg-s) of the PT hierarchy and to practice this structure in a communicative setting in the EFL classroom.

In contrast to exercises, where the main focus is on grammatical accuracy, tasks have the advantage that the main goal is task fulfillment, i.e. a learner can use whatever resources are available to him/her to work on the task. As in real life, there is not only one right way to solve a given task, and different people would use different strategies. Different learners might use different structures from different levels within the PT hierarchy. If we use a Spot-The-Difference-Task (cf. Chapter 7), different learners could use question formation strategies of the PT stages one to five. In order to find out about a difference they could use the following questions:

1. *Boy play basketball in your picture?
2. The boys play basketball in your picture?
3. Do the boys play basketball in your picture?
4. Are there boys in your picture who play basketball?
5. What are the boys doing in your picture? Do they play basketball?

This is exactly what can be done in heterogeneous classrooms. Once the teacher knows about the communicative and linguistic needs and the developmental stage (using *Rapid Profile*, cf. Chapter 11) of the learners, he or she is able to organize the course according to the diagnostic task-cycle (Keßler 2008b) summarized above. The two tasks mentioned in the previous paragraphs are examples of tasks that help to diagnose a learner's current developmental stage. Knowing that, a teacher can use tasks where all learners can use those language structures that are available to them or those which they should acquire next. (For a teaching unit which offers tasks that focus on the individual's needs, see Keßler and Liebner in press). All these steps lead to a developmentally-moderated syllabus in which teachers organize their course according to the communicative needs of the learners and also support their linguistic progress (Keßler 2007) by taking into account the Teachability Hypothesis (Pienemann 1998).

Summary

This chapter discusses the link between second language acquisition research and foreign language teaching. It summarizes the idea behind the Teachability Hypothesis, namely that "you can't skip stages". The studies discussed in this chapter support this hypothesis. At the same time the developmental regularities in both natural as well as instructed SLA contain great potential for teaching intervention and pedagogical approaches to curriculum design and error correction. The key point is to tailor teaching and error correction to the individual level of the learner. This can best be achieved by a combination of TBLT and timed intervention.

Study questions

1. Explain, why today we are in a position to reverse Allwright's (1984) question.
2. Discuss the role of developmentally moderated focus on form in foreign language teaching.
3. Look at the transcript from Chapter 5 again. (Appendix B) What would this learner be ready to learn next? Why?
4. Create a task targeting question formation in a heterogeneous classroom. The task should cater for both the linguistic and communicative needs of the learners.