

**Formal Linguistics
and "the Best Practices" of Language Instruction**
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Abstract

This work highlights the similarity in the fundamental conception about language that can and should be shared by theoretical linguists, language acquisition specialists and language professionals – linguistics competence is essentially a mental grammar, a linguistic system internalized by users according to the primary linguistic data accessible to learners. Recognizing this would bring the focus of language learning process to learners themselves rather than instructors and draw attention to the importance of input in the target language. Accordingly, curricula can be more effectively designed and better practices adopted in language classrooms. Specifically, I will show how formal generative linguistic studies, as well as relevant second language acquisition research, can help us better understand and also provide guidance and support for the "best practices" in foreign language education currently advocated in the US. Some concrete examples will be provided to illustrate applications of the theoretical studies and implementations of the best practices.

Keywords: formal grammar, internalized linguistic system, interlanguage, best practices, grammar teaching

A common perception about theoretical linguistics by language teaching professionals is that the research is too abstract to be useful in practical language teaching or learning. This is especially so with formal generative lin-

gustic studies. Generative grammar has been perceived as emphasizing core principles too much, neglecting detailed important points in individual languages. The so-called parameters for systematic and principled differences among languages are so general that they cannot have practical applications. Not surprisingly, the separation between generative theoretical linguists and language professionals seems to be farther and farther apart.

This work aims to bring the two seemingly very different camps back to the fundamental conception about language that the two can and should share – linguistic competence is essentially a mental grammar, a linguistic system internalized by users. Recognizing this would help us decide on more effective curricular design and adoption of better practices in language programs. Specifically, I will show how the underlying principles of formal generative linguistic studies, as well as relevant second language acquisition research, can help us better understand and also provide guidance and support for the “best practices” in foreign language education currently advocated in the US.¹ Some concrete examples will be provided to illustrate applications of the theoretical studies and implementations of the best practices.

1. “Best Practices”

The notion of “best practices” arose because of the need to define clearer guidelines so that the efficacy of language learning programs can be more fairly evaluated and learners’ learning outcome better assessed.

For a long time, foreign language education in the US was not of much interest to the policy makers or the general public. Advocacy was sporadic and did not gain much traction. This had been so till the 9/11 tragedy in 2001.

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This work reflects the author’s experiences in the US context. Different regions might face different challenges and adopt different philosophies and practices. Further note that the terms second language and foreign language learning are not distinguished in this paper. The focus is on classroom teaching of a non-native language.

The event created a sense of urgency and brought about paradigmatic changes. In response to the perceived lack of understanding of the language, people and culture of the countries critical to the US interest and national security, President Bush announced in January 2006 the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) -- an inter-agency effort coordinated by the White House to increase dramatically the number of U.S. residents learning, speaking, and teaching critical-need foreign languages. Many agencies started or expanded programs with more funding and urgency, such as Department of Education,² Department of State,³ Department of Defense,⁴ and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Among the programs created and expanded under the initiative, the one that has been most actively advocating for specific pedagogy for language teaching/learning is the STARTALK program, initiated by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. It is a summer program training teachers and providing language learning opportunities mainly for K12 students (elementary and high schools; in some cases, even starting with pre-kindergarten). The languages covered are Arabic, Chinese, Dari, Hindi, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili, Turkish, and Urdu. Beginning from a very small number of programs in 2007, it has grown to a total of 182 programs funded in the summer of 2012, including 112 programs in Chinese teacher and student programs, located in all but one state in the US.⁵ It has not only brought language learning opportunities to many communities that otherwise would not even have any plans in the foreseeable future to offer relevant language courses but also provided training on pedagogical principles and techniques, course design and material development. Teachers participating in such programs not only include those who are about to enter the field, new to it, but also experienced ones. Master teachers are

² The programs are: Foreign Language Assistance Program, Teacher-to-Teacher Initiative, Advancing America through Foreign Language Partnerships.
³ Intensive Summer Language Institutes, Fulbright Critical Language Enhancement Awards for U.S. Students Program, Gilman Scholarships for Study Abroad, NSLI-Youth, Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistants, Teachers of Critical Languages Program.
⁴ The Language Flagship, National Language Service Corps.
⁵ For lists of programs through the years, visit <http://startalk.umd.edu/programs>

cultivated to help train more instructors. What makes STARTALK stand out is its insistence on a rigorous and consistent adoption of the “best practices” in all the programs it sponsors. Standard curricular templates must be followed in the program design so that everything related to the program including materials, methodologies and strategies will be to meet the intended goals of proficiency-building. Each program is reviewed on site to ensure adherence to the relevant principles and practices. This has an unprecedented effect on the field of language teaching/learning. The US education system tends to be overly *laissez faire*. At the elementary and high school levels, there are licensure requirements and state standards to abide by. However, such requirements tend to be more general than language specific and appropriate. Moreover, at the college level, there usually are not to be any formal requirements. In the great majority of cases, it is the language program director or supervising faculty in individual programs that determines the curricula and oversees the staffing and operation. Although ACTFL published National Standards for Foreign Language Education in 1996, (http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/Standards_forFLLexecsum_rev.pdf) the effect of any standards on the field of Chinese language instruction appeared to be quite limited for a very long time.

The rise of STARTALK programs in recent years has spurred a transformation. The emphasis on adherence to a specific set of principles and practices by STARTALK has created and foregrounded a significant number of teacher trainees and trainers that widely spread and implement the “best practices.” Programs at all levels are directly impacted, even though the target has been for K12. This is because many of the programs have been offered by instructors in colleges, which means that these instructors themselves need to follow and be able to demonstrate the best practices. The teacher trainees that complete the programs bring what they have learned to their schools. Students so trained move upward to higher and higher levels. What are the “best practices” that have been so prominently advocated? They are couched on principles that are considered to be essential for effective language teaching as in (1) and implemented through instructional strat-

egies like (2).

(1) STARTALK endorsed principles for effective teaching

a. implementing a standards-based⁶ and thematically organized curric-

ulum

⁶ The relevant standards for language learning are based on the ACTFL national standards for foreign language education. For teacher-training programs, the following are essential references:

INTASC (Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium) Standards
The INTASC standards are for licensing new teachers of world languages in the contexts of elementary education and special education. They specify what teachers need to know and are able to do within the first three years of their teaching in order to help students effectively learn the target language and culture. These standards are based on 10 core principles: (1) subject matter knowledge; (2) child development; (3) learner diversity; (4) instructional strategies; (5) learning environment; (6) communication; (7) planning; (8) assessment; (9) reflection/professional development; and (10) collaboration. <http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/ForeignLanguageStandards.pdf>

NBPTS (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards)

The NBPTS are for experienced subject matter teachers. The standards incorporate the essential knowledge, skills, dispositions and commitments that are expected of accomplished teachers. They center on the following facets: (1) knowledge of students; (2) knowledge of language; (3) knowledge of culture; (4) knowledge of language acquisition; (5) fair and equitable learning environment; (6) designing curriculum and planning instruction; (7) assessment; (8) reflection; and (9) professionalism. See http://www.nbpts.org/userfiles/File/ैया_wioe_standards.pdf (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages/NCAE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) Standards. They are for graduates of world language teacher preparation programs. Six content standards are adopted in these standards: (1) Language, Linguistics and Comparisons; (2) Cultures, Literatures and Cross-Disciplinary Concepts; (3) Language Acquisition Theories and Instructional Practices; (4) Integration of Student Standards into Curriculum and Instruction; (5) Assessment of Languages and Cultures; and (6) Professionalism. These standards consist of 16 supporting standards, which describe the knowledge of world language content and pedagogy that teachers should possess, the skills that they need for planning, teaching and assessing, as well as their prescribed attitudes and beliefs about language teaching and professional growth. See <http://www.actfl.org/files/public/ACTFLNCAEStandardsRevised713.pdf> TEAC (Teacher Education Accredita-

tion Council) Principles

These principles describe what are required of candidates in teacher preparation programs. In addition to subject matter and pedagogical knowledge and teaching skills, the principles promote multiculturalism and integration of technology into language instruction. See <http://www.teac.org/index.php/accreditation/goals-principles/quality-principles-for-teacher-education-programs>

- b. setting up clear goals and applying the principle of backward design
- c. facilitating a learner-centered classroom
- d. using target language and providing comprehensible input for instruction
- e. integrating culture, content, and language in a world language classroom⁷
- f. adapting and using age-appropriate authentic materials
- g. conducting performance-based assessment

(2) Instructional Strategies

- a. using target language and providing comprehensible input for instruction
- b. facilitating a learner-centered classroom
- c. meaningful interaction in the target language
- d. integrating culture, content, and language
- e. differentiation of instruction based on student needs and learning styles

Although most of the points listed above are probably more or less self-evident, some of the practices might not be what they are commonly understood or implemented. For instance, consider the notion of “learner-centered” instruction. Even a language instructor that pays attention to interaction with students might find that his/her classroom is not quite learner-centered, as the following practices are very commonly found (e.g., Debbie Robinson and Anne Tollefson, 2011):

- (3) in a typical non-learner-centered classroom:
- a. The teacher worries that there will not be enough time to answer students’ questions
- b. The teacher focuses on finishing the lesson as planned.
- c. The teacher is doing most of the talking and thinking.
- d. The class consists mostly of direct teaching.

⁷ The term “world language” has replaced “foreign language”, reflecting a new perspective.

the emphasis on students' being active and creative learners of the target language and being able to use the language in spontaneous communication – language used out of the frame provided by textbooks and teachers' instruction. Examples will be provided in the last section to illustrate the working of these notions.

2. Generative linguistic research

To understand how language learning can be successful, we need to begin with the question of what a language is and what it means to know a language. Under the conceptions of generative linguistic theory (for instance, Chomsky 1957, 1970, 1981, 1986, 2001), a distinction between the so-called E(xternal)-language and I(nternal)-language is made. I-language is the unconscious tacit knowledge that a speaker has of his/her language. This implicit knowledge consists of mental (symbolic) representations and operations rooted in the brain-a mental grammar. The mental grammar is engaged in generating the E(xternal)-language, as well as other cognitive capacities (for example, a real-time parser with working memory limitations, knowledge of the world and a system of inferences, etc.).

There is much evidence demonstrating that speakers indeed produce their utterances according to their mental grammar – their internalized grammatical system. For instance, speakers do not just repeat the sentences they have heard; they are constantly creating and interpreting novel sentences. They can even assign some meaning to sentences with nonsensical words, such as *The gloed ate an odke weickly* (which must mean that some object was eaten by some individual in some manner described by *weickly*).⁸ Indeed, grammatical contexts yield the core meanings. Words of one speech category can be “coerced” into another category in the proper construction. Take English for example. It is quite prominent in using typical nouns as verbs, as long as they appear in the verbal context:

⁸ Those familiar with “cloze test” – filling in words that are missing at regular intervals in paragraphs, must have experienced their knowledge of linguistic rules at work.

- e. The teacher has arranged the desks in rows and students work individually.
- f. The teacher prefers a quiet classroom.
- g. The teacher asks students questions that only elicit factual one-word responses.
- h. The teacher expects students to respond quickly and correctly.
- i. The teacher responds mostly with evaluative comments; such as "well done, good, that's not right, or providing the "correct" answer.
- j. The teacher tends to create one task that is designed for all learners.
- k. The teacher has the same expectations for every learner.
- l. The teacher uses activities directly from the textbook.

Some of these practices seem to be unavoidable to many teachers. This is especially so when most language programs in the US are still textbook-centric; great ingenuity is needed to devise and implement "learner-centered" instruction. Designing standard-based curricula according to learning objectives (backward design) also seems to be challenging when the goal of instructors is to complete the required number of units in a textbook within a term. Furthermore, the reliance of textbooks has made many instructors hesitate to consider thematically organized course materials. Indeed, many teachers have been very suspicious of these so-called "best practices". They contend that textbook-based curricula provide students clearer guidance, give students very concrete, step-by-step well-organized instruction and students would learn better. Students feel more comfortable following textbooks. Moreover, the concept of learner-centeredness is not quite easily accepted by instructors. They feel that they need to "teach enough" because they are instructors and they know what the best is for students.

In the following sections, I will discuss how from the perspective of generative linguistic studies and the related second language acquisition research that the proposed "best practices" indeed can be effective tools to help students attain higher language proficiency, because they are more conducive to students' internalizing the system of their interlanguage. A key is

(4) a. Let's knife/fork/spoon it.

b. He should table/chair/floor/book/bench it.

We can even creatively use the following expressions, as long as some sense can be made out of these expressions:

(5) a. Let's chopstick it.

b. He should ceiling/wall it.

Similarly, it has been commonly observed that a noun in Chinese can become an adjective such as when it occurs in the context of an adjectival predicate - following *hen* 'very' or the comparative *geng* 'more':⁹

(6) a. ta hen kexue.

he veryscience

'He is scientific.'

b. ta bi wo geng kexue

he compare me more science

'He is more scientific than me.'

In short, to know a language means the possession of linguistic competence or I-language - a system of rules that allows speakers to create and understand infinite and novel combinations. What does the system of rules look like? The grammar of a language is essentially a computational system with lexical items of that language as building blocks. Items from the lexicon are combined to make bigger and bigger phrases. The computational system that governs the merger of lexical items and creation of infinite sentences is generally considered to be Universal Grammar with some particularities in specific grammars for individual languages. The former is what characterizes all human languages. The latter would allow for differences among languages. Cross-linguistic differences can be understood as residing in

⁹ I came across years ago a newspaper report on NBA players visiting Taiwan using such a headline: *jinye hen lanqiu* 'tonight is very basketball'. Unfortunately, I have not been able to re-locate the source.

¹⁰ A “parameter” has different values (generally two). Different languages adopt different values, which accounts for systematic differences among languages. ¹¹ Some translations do not faithfully reflect the differences between the two languages because of the lack of more appropriate words. For instance, *kill* in English means the act of killing causing someone to become dead. *Shain* Chinese on-ly means the activity part and the result needs to be expressed by the morpheme ‘dead’. The same distinction of activity with or without result is also true with all the other pairs of examples in (7), although the translation fails to demonstrate this clearly.

morphology (Chomsky 1995, Borer 2005, for instance) or grammatical parameters¹⁰ (e.g. Baker 2008). The differences are systematic and have overt clues generally. For instance, some systematic differences between English and Chinese might be subsumed under an analytic vs. synthetic parameter (such as Huang 2007). This parameter captures the generalization that Chinese tends to have a closer word-morpheme correspondence but an English word may consist of several morphemes (morpheme defined as the smallest meaningful unit in a language). Many examples can demonstrate this distinction. The following are three cases illustrating the relevant contrast between these two languages.

One concerns the countability of nouns. An indication of nouns being countable in English is the occurrence of the plural morpheme *-s* suffixed to nouns N-s, such as the countable *apples*, as compared to a non-countable noun such as *blood*, which normally does not take the plural morpheme. The use of *-s* in English contrasts with the reliance on classifiers (or measure words) to make nouns countable in Chinese (e.g., Chao 1968, Li and Thompson 1981, Tai and Wang 1990, among many others) – Classifier/Measure word + N as in *liang ben shu* ‘two classifier book = two books’.

Another example has to do with the presence vs. absence of accomplishment verbs in English and Chinese. English verbs can be the so-called accomplishment verbs such as *learn, convince, persuade, manage*, which are made of two parts – activity + result. Chinese uses two words to express the relevant concepts (Tai 1984). Therefore, we have the following correspondences:¹¹

Chinese	learn	learn
	convince/persuade	shui-fu
	correct	gai-zheng
	kill	sha-si
	catch	zhua-zhu/dao
		'catch-hold/arrive'
		'kill-die'
		'change-straight'
		'speak-obedient'
		'study-capable'

The English verbs in (7) all encode results of activities, while Chinese needs to use V+Result compounds. Therefore, an example like (8a) is inherent in English but the counterpart is acceptable in Chinese.

(8) a. #He learned French but till now he still does not know French.

b. ta xue-le Fawen keshi dao xianzai ta haishi bu hui Fawen.

he study-asp French but till now he still not can French.

'He studied French but till now he still does not know French.'

The comparison between *learn* and *study* is revealing: *study* corresponds to *xue* in Chinese and *learn*, *xue-hui* 'study-capable'. The other pairs in (7) can be similarly contrasted.

A third example is the composition of *wh*-words. English has interrogative words like *who/what/which/where/when* etc., which generally are interpreted as interrogative expressions.¹² In contrast, the Chinese counterparts generally need some other words to express the different meanings. For instance, *shei* 'who' or *shenme* 'what' can occur with *dou* 'all' to become a universal quantifier 'every-N'. A co-occurring *you* 'have' may create an existential expression 'some/any-N'. These *wh*-words can also occur with the particle *ne* to make *wh*-questions, although the question particle need not be overt (see Aoun and Li 1993a,b Cheng 1991, Tsai 1994 for the properties of a question operator).

¹² In Aoun and Li (1993a,b), Tsai (1994), for instance, *wh*-words in English are analyzed as operators or inherently quantificational, including when they introduce relative clauses.

What does such a conception of linguistic competence mean in the context of second language acquisition? The next section briefly describes the insight from the relevant second language acquisition studies.

Briefly summarizing, linguistic competence is the system about a language - a speaker's mental capacity, which allows him/her to understand and produce novel and infinite utterances in that language. Utterances are manifestations of the internal system (cf. E-language vs. I-language). The system consists of lexicon and computation. Cross-linguistic differences are systematic. That is, speakers of a language tend to use the same strategy to analyze and integrate clusters of patterns they are acquiring - micro-parameters and macro-parameters.

These pairs of English and Chinese patterns illustrate the notion of "micro-parameters" - smaller-scale differences in specific constructions between languages. Multiple instantiations of the same type of micro-parameters make a macro-parameter. A macro-parameter is larger scale and systematically applies to all the relevant patterns across languages. The notion of macro-parameter can be understood as speakers using the same strategy in analyzing a cluster of more specific patterns, which constitute instances of micro-parameters.

- (9) a. ta shenme douyou.
he what all have
'He has everything.'
b. you shet xiang qu, wo jin qing ta qu.
have who want go I then invite him go
'If there is anyone that wants to go, I will invite him to go.'
c. kengyou shei xihuan ta.
perhaps have who like him
'Perhaps someone likes him.'
d. ta xihuan shei/shenme ne?
he like who/what Q
'Who/What does he like?'

3. Second Language Acquisition

From the theoretical linguistic perspective, some major issues regarding second language acquisition are: what is the process involved in second language acquisition? Is it the same or different from that of first language acquisition? If different, in what ways are they different? What would be contributing factors for successful second language acquisition? Such issues have been investigated in great depth and interesting experimental results have been produced. To directly relate to the theme of this paper regarding the best practices of language instruction, let us just focus on the main claims from the related second language acquisition studies.

First, consider the relevant main conceptions regarding the process involved in language acquisition, specifically second language. To acquire a language means the attainment of linguistic competence in the target language, Second language acquisition is often compared with first language acquisition with respect to the state of the starting point (the initial state) and the tools available to acquire languages. According to the generative grammar, first language acquisition develops from the initial state to the final state (the final stable product, the adult grammar) with an innate language acquisition device. The language acquisition device can be understood as some capacity or mechanism that every human being is born with that makes possible the acquisition of the language in his/her speech community within a short amount of time. In grammatical terms, this device is Universal Grammar – the properties characterizing human languages. However, to attain the linguistic competence of a second language involves much more. Many issues have been raised in this context – is the innate language acquisition device (Universal Grammar) still accessible when one goes beyond the critical age of learning one's native language? Is there transfer from previously acquired languages (native language L1 transfer) in the learning process?¹³ That is, the initial state of first and second language acquisition could differ and the tools available to acquire languages might also be different from the second language, there is an additional question of whether transfer from the second language occurs.

ferent (transfer or not, access to Universal Grammar or not). Let us return to these issues shortly. The main point to focus on here is the similarity in the process of acquiring first and second language – both are built on input - “primary linguistic data” and both involve the formation and revision of linguistic systems in the learner’s mind (internalized system). Within the generative grammar, primary linguistic data is as critical to first language acquisition as the innate language acquisition device. According to the primary linguistic data or the input, learners, guided by their linguistic acquisition device, form their hypotheses about the system of the language they are learning.¹⁴ The hypotheses formed are part of their mental grammar – the internalized linguistic competence in the language. The hypotheses form an interlanguage, which undergoes continuous revision in order to reach the final state (native competence). Revisions take place because the hypotheses formed according to the input are applied to create new cases, which will be evaluated as correct or incorrect against further linguistic data. Similarly, the process of second language acquisition essentially is also hypothesis generation, hypothesis testing, and the extension of knowledge to new contexts (Gass and Selinker 2008, section 11.2 of chapter 11). New hypotheses are formed and further testing, revision continue. That this continuous process is indeed involved in language acquisition can be attested from the numerous observations that learners’ mistakes are generally rule-based and not random. Many of such examples have been reported in the literature on first language acquisition. Focusing on second language acquisition, Gass and Selinker (2008, 14) articulate this concept clearly “The basic assumption of SLA [Second Language Acquisition] is that learners create a language system, known as an interlanguage (IL). This concept validates learners’ speech, not as a deficit system, that is, a language filled with random errors, but as a system of its own with its own structure. This system is composed

¹⁴ This is why even though there are normally no imperfect native speakers of a language (unless due to neurological problems), “heritage learners” in a different speech community may acquire an incomplete system or fossilize some wrong conceptions about the system because of the discontinuation of input.

of numerous elements, not the least of which are elements from the NL (native language) and the TL (target language). These latter are called new forms and are the empirical essence of interlanguage. What is important is that the learners themselves impose structure on the available linguistic data and formulate an internalized system (IL): "They further illustrate with examples the steps taken by learners about the formation of their interlanguage: hypothesis generation, hypothesis testing, and the extension of knowledge to new contexts.

Such conceptions of second language acquisition highlight the active role played by learners in the learning process. Learners do not simply memorize what they hear or see. Rather, they organize the input according to their existing knowledge, add to or modify their current system, forming their mental grammar of the language. They apply the rules in their mental grammar to create new sentences or discourse. The rules (hypotheses) according to which they build new utterances would be confirmed or refuted and revised. In other words, a system making sense of the input is organized and internalized such that learners are able to continuously accommodate new generalizations in their mental grammar. In this context, it is interesting to note that Bruhn-Garavito's (1995) study suggests that L2 learners can work out subtle properties of the L2 even given explicit input which is actually misleading as to abstract properties of the L2.

Despite their important similarities, second language acquisition does differ from first language acquisition because of the presence vs. absence of the mental grammar for the first language. Then, what is initial state for second language learning? Is there interference from the first language on second language learning? What are the mechanisms or tools available to acquire a second language, especially in the case of adult second language acquisition, which is past the so-called critical period for language acquisition (see, for instance, Long 1990, Birdsong 1999, among many others). In the literature, there have been studies with results ranging over all the logical possibilities – from no transfer from the first language and full access to Universal Grammar through partial transfer, limited access, to full transfer

and no access to Universal Grammar. Clearly, we need many more studies with all the variables well controlled and experimental results replicable to a larger number of subjects and over a long enough period of time. It is also possible that individual variations exist. After all, it has been widely accepted that learners can have very different learning styles (see Wesche 1981, Skehan 1989, 1991, Harley and Hart 1997, Johnson, Prior, and Artuso 2000, Ehrman 2001, Cohen and Macaro 2007, among many others). Nonetheless, if language transfer does take place or access to Universal Grammar is available, generative grammar provides a model that easily captures structural relatedness – the notion of macro parameter and micro parameter.¹⁵ Differences between the first and second language are more systematic than randomness. Understanding the systematic differences can help with more effective hypothesis making, resulting in a more accurate mental representation of the grammar of the target language.

In brief, according to the generative theoretical perspective and the related studies on second language acquisition, learners are always actively participating in the learning process. They are constantly forming and revising their mental grammar – the internalized system underlying the comprehension and production of the target language. Primary linguistic data are essential to hypothesis generation and testing.¹⁶ Being able to test new utterances in different contexts is critical to the confirmation or revision of the relevant hypotheses, leading to the attainment of the final state. Without ample opportunities for creating new utterances in a good variety of contexts at appropriate times, “fossilization” could be a true concern – becoming “permanently established in the interlanguage of a second language learner in a form that is deviant from the target-language norm and that continues to

¹⁵Gass and Selinker (2008, p.177) note that “Within earlier approaches to transfer (particularly a contrastive analysis approach), there was no way to show how related structures were linked in the minds of second language learners. Nonetheless, a model that involves structural relatedness clearly represents an innovative approach to language transfer.”

¹⁶In the studies by White (2003) and others, it was shown that primary linguistic data are more important to “parameter resetting”, rather than explicit teaching of grammar.

appear in performance regardless of further exposure to the target language" (Gass and Selinker (2008, 14).

4. Second language learning and teaching

Given the importance of a mental grammar that a learner continuously forms and revises, does it mean that explicit teaching of grammatical rules by instructors would be most effective to successful second language learning? The collective wisdom of the field to move from a grammar and translation approach to more communication-focused approaches suggests that successful language learning cannot simply rely on the explicit teaching and studying of rules. Nonetheless, some classrooms that adopt more meaningful practices are not always as successful as one would like to see, either. Why are meaningful practices not always enough? This will be shown to have much to do with our theoretical discussions in the previous two sections: learners should be active participants and primary linguistic data in varieties of contexts are critical. In the following subsections, let us examine some common practices in current foreign language classrooms and show why they often fall short of intended objectives.

4.1. Teacher-centered, textbook-based

Despite the move toward more communication-focused instruction, most of current foreign language classes are teacher-centered and textbook-based. Teachers feel that they need to teach as much as they can because they are very responsible instructors and students can learn better if they teach well and enough and can provide constant guidance. Teachers generally rely on textbooks that they feel comfortable with; then, they try their best to finish the number of lessons they plan for the term. They carry students through lesson by lesson. In such a language learning environment, everything is very well structured and perfectly guided. For each lesson of a textbook, there will be vocabulary and several patterns. In a supposedly fairly good model using the communicative approach, an instructor generally would go through the vocabulary list (either in sentences or not). Then, the instructor puts patterns on the board, uses mostly the question-answer technique, with

the aid of pictures, realia so that students get to practice the patterns. Suppose one of the patterns is to practice the placement of time words – [Subject + Time words + Verb (+Object)]. The teacher might prepare many pictures of activities and time words, asking students as a group or individually questions like *ta xingqi-yi zuo shenme?* 'what does he do on Monday?', *ni shang-ge zhoumo zuo shenme?* 'what did you do last weekend?'. Some teachers would refer to the patterns on the board constantly to remind students of the patterns they are using and to help students put words in each slot. After some practices, teachers might lead students to read the text or ask students to do so or ask questions about the text. At the end, if there is enough time, the teacher might ask students to do some activity, such as pairing students and having them ask each other what they did last week. If there is more time, the result of the activity would be reported to the class. However, the student activity part is discouraged by some instructors because of the apparent chaos in the classroom and the concern that students would learn incorrect pronunciations from each other. Class time is very limited. It should be used for well-structured teaching and highly-organized practices rather than some seemingly chaotic practices with bad models. In addition, it is important to finish the number of lessons planned for each term. Programs sometimes are evaluated according to how many lessons are taught in a term. Because many schools are using similar textbooks, it is important that students are taught as many lessons as possible.

What was described above is very typical of current foreign language instruction in the US. In such classrooms, everything is highly structured, well under control, including students' responses to the instructor's guidance. Students are on a fixed, predictable path, restricted to a rigid mode. Classes are managed excellently. Teachers do the thinking, planning and are talking much more than students. Teachers want to be certain that every student understands the lessons planned for the term. There is always a lot to learn in a very limited amount of time. Time management is important. Therefore, teachers make sure that they hold students' hands tightly. The important concern is always that if they don't teach enough, they would not

be able to complete all the lessons and students would not learn well. In the end, teachers are exhausted. Students also easily become passive learners. They have few opportunities to be active learners, to process the data they have received and organize them in their brains to form hypotheses for further testing.

4.2. Explicit instruction of grammatical rules

In addition to the dominating role taken by teachers and the emphasis on the number of lessons covered in a term, current language instruction is still heavily rule-oriented. The move away from the grammar and translation approach has been more of avoiding translation than de-emphasizing grammar. Widely available and used are grammar books or companion rule exercises to textbooks. An overwhelming majority of textbooks highlight patterns, explanations of patterns, etc. Instruction is often organized to facilitate the teaching of certain rules. Is such explicit teaching of grammar the way to help learners learn the target language? Given the fact that there are many different types of learners, it would be irresponsible to claim, without enough experimental studies, that such explicit teaching of rules is not the right strategy to help students learn.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the lesson we have learned from the research of theoretical linguistics and second language acquisition is that successful learning must be achieved by the learners eventually – they need to take what they are exposed to, organize them in their brains and put the rules they have in their brains to work. Primary linguistic data are critical stimuli to such a hypothesis generation and testing process. Too much teaching of explicit rules in classrooms may deprive students of important opportunities to actively use their brains to organize the data. There are also other challenges in teaching grammar. Some of the challenges come from the adequacy of our existing explicit knowledge and description of grammar

¹⁷ Unfortunately, there have been few experimental studies directly comparing the presence vs. absence of explicit rule teaching with all the logically possible confounding variables well controlled.

The challenge regarding the adequacy of describing our grammatical knowledge can be illustrated by many patterns in Chinese. Take for instance the ubiquitous marker *le*, the so-called complete or perfective aspect marker,¹⁸ and *ba*, the so-called disposal or executive or object preposing construction marker (and many other terms). Despite the numerous attempts by linguists and language instructors, it is not clear that there is an adequate description of the usages. Even if linguists' jobs are completed successfully and all the rules can be adequately described, it is impossible to ascertain that students internalize rules in the way they are supposed to.

For instance, what is a "complete or perfective" aspect marker, as *le* is generally referred to? Is it like the perfective aspect in English? But a translation of *Have you had beef noodle before?* is generally one with the experiential aspect marker *guo* as in *ni chi-guo niurou mian ma?* 'Have you had beef noodle?' Is it like the past tense marker in English? Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to find mistakes made by advanced learners such as *ta shuo-le ni xue-le Zhongwen* 'He said that you studied Chinese'. The issue with *ba* is even worse. It is difficult to find clear, accurate, precise and easy-to-understand, jargon-free descriptions of the constructions that make *ba* acceptable or unacceptable. Textbooks and grammar references present only partial and sometimes not quite appropriate statements. It is not obvious what students have understood about the *ba* construction. Still another example concerns the position of adverbs or prepositional phrases modifying verbs or verb phrases. A common rule is to say that these phrases should appear before the modified verbs or verb phrases, illustrated by the very frequently used sentences in language classes like (10a-b), where the location phrase 'in the library' and the time phrase '7 o'clock' modify the following

¹⁸*Le* can also be used as a sentence-final particle to denote change of state. Writing or saying the words "change of state" is easy. However, it is not always clear that students know what these words mean and how they apply. Being able to describe and truly understand linguistic concepts is not an easy task. Instructors having taught introduction to linguistics courses know very well how many college students have difficulties even in the building blocks of linguistic knowledge - the definitions of parts of speech, such as nouns or verbs.

verb phrase:

- (10) a. tazai tushuguan kan shu
 he at library read book
 'He is studying in the library.'
 b. wo qi-dian qi-chuang.
 I 7-o'clock up-bed
 'I get up at 7 o'clock.'

However, students would also be using sentences like the one below, where the location phrase follows the verb:

- (11) wo zhu-zai Taipei.
 I live-at Taipei
 'I live in Taipei.'

It is not surprising that a significant number of students in their second or even third year of language study still are not sure how to position such phrases.¹⁹

Of course, there are clearer rules, some of which are much easier to describe, such as the formation of relative clauses, in contrast to the corresponding pattern in English (relative clause before or after the modified noun). However, having students study relative clause formation rules does not mean that they can use the pattern appropriately. Very interesting studies by Schachter (1974) for instance have shown that learners avoid using the structure.

On the other hand, there are other constructions showing that, without teachers' explicit teaching and focused guided practices, students still manage to learn them. For instance, there have been few course materials, if not none, highlighting the fact that many phrases with prepositions in English do not correspond to prepositional phrases in Chinese. Instead, only nouns oc-

¹⁹ A frequent explanation is to say that a result location occurs postverbally and the location where an action takes place occurs preverbally. However, see Liu (2009) for the inadequacy of this distinction.

Most relevant to our discussion on the role of explicit grammar teaching is the fact that the interesting constructions in (12)-(13) and many similar ones have somehow failed to catch attention of language teachers or textbook authors and are largely missing in language instruction materials. However, probably to the great surprise of those advocating for the importance of sufficient and explicit teaching, it seems that no instructors have ever complained about students not being able to learn such patterns.

The pattern illustrated by (13b) is especially interesting because it involves comparison of items of different types, which is generally not possible in English.

'His books are more than me (=He has more books than I do).'

he-DE book compare I even more

b. ta-de shu bi wohai duo.

'(The food in) this restaurant is delicious.'

this-CL restaurant very delicious

(13) a. zhe-jia canting hen haochi.

'Seeing movies, I like to see (in) evenings.'

I see movie like see evening

d. wokan dianying xihuan kan wanshang.

'I often go (to) Taipei for fun.'

I often go Taipei play

c. wo changchang qu Taipei wan.

'Please draw (on) this paper.'

please you draw this-CL paper

b. qing ni hua zhe-zhang zhi

'Please sit (on) this chair.'

please you sit this-CL chair

(12) a. qing ni zuo zhe-ge yizi.

seem to be missing, such as in (13).

cur as in (12) and sometimes even more materials corresponding to English

In fact, it would seem challenging to explain these patterns to students in a comprehensible manner. For instance, one way might be to say that the Ps corresponding to English Ps in (12a-d) are deleted in Chinese. However, students cannot take this and extend it to an instance like (14a-b), because *dao* and *zai* in these sentences cannot be missing.

(14) a. wo changchang dao Taipei qu wan.
I often to Taipei go play
'I often go to Taipei for fun.'

b. qing ni zai zhe-zhang zhi hua hua
please you at this-CL paper draw drawing
'Please draw on this paper.'

One cannot say that all preverbal Ps cannot be deleted, either. The following sentence is fine with or without *zai*:

(15) wo xihuan (zai) wanshang kan dianying.
I like at evening see movie
'I like to see movies in the evening.'

Nor can one say that all postverbal Ps can or cannot be deleted, illustrated by the following contrasts. In (16a), *zai* is optional; (16b), obligatorily present; (16c), obligatorily absent:

(16) a. tamen xihuan zhu (zai) NiuYue.
they like live at NewYork
'They like to live in New York.'

b. tamen gang chuxian *(zai)NiuYue.
they just appear at NewYork
'They just appeared in New York.'

c. tamen xihuan pao *(zai) gongyuan.
they like run at park
'They like to run in the park.'

As far as I know, there have been no materials prepared for language instructors and/or students clearly explaining what conditions make the sentences like those in (12)-(16) good or bad. Yet, language teachers do not seem to worry about these issues, either.

In brief, the gap between grammar instruction and successful learning of rules and application in real-life situations can be summarized by the observation in Gass and Selinker (2008, 390) “instructed learning may clearly result in inappropriate conclusions drawn by learners precisely because the input is often impoverished and because emphasis on certain forms is selective.”

4.3. “Meaningful” practice

Even in the context of “improved” language instruction, where instructors put more emphasis on students’ use of the language, there are still challenges. For instance, teachers adopting a communicative approach seem to provide meaningful practices of patterns; therefore, students would be able to learn patterns in context and use the language meaningfully. However, the challenge again lies in whether students are really given the opportunity to go through the important grammar-internalization process – hypothesis generation, hypothesis testing, and the extension of knowledge to new contexts.

Consider the following very commonly used strategy, which is generally regarded to exemplify meaningful practices, key to a good communicative approach to language instruction. The instructor writes on the board or presents a powerpoint slide neatly listing the pattern that is the focus of study for the class period, such as practicing the position of time expressions [Subject + Time + Verb + Object] briefly mentioned in the previous section. Then, the instructor points to the pattern and presents pictures showing a variety of activities with times. Students are asked questions like “What did X do yesterday?” or “When did X do Y?” (pointing to the picture and the pattern). Being able to provide answers to such questions constitutes evidence for successful learning.

Is the learning indeed successful? How many times have instructors had the following experience? Students have learned very well in classrooms, able to answer questions and even conduct mini dialogues according to the clues provided by a variety of visual aids (pictures, gestures etc.). There are patterns explicitly noted on the board or the screen, showing that students are relating examples to patterns. Students must have learned the relevant rules perfectly. Unfortunately, when they are outside the classroom or are in different contexts, mistakes abound and students seem to have "forgotten" what they have learned. That is, when they are "out of the frame" or "outside the mode", the learning turns out not to be successful. Why is it so? The key is that the said practice is actually an exercise of item substitution, rather than truly meaningful generation of utterances. Students just need to know the words that fit into the pattern and mechanically put the words in the slots (often aided by enthusiastic teachers' gestures). They are basically filling words into the pre-determined slots and do not need to think much to perform the relevant tasks. They do not even need to know what the sentences mean. They just need to remember some relevant words. Because not much thinking is needed, they are not active learners and do not have opportunities to go through the successful rule-internalization process – hypothesis generation, hypothesis testing, and the extension of knowledge to new contexts. The teaching and practice might help with hypothesis generation; but learners do not have the crucial follow-up in hypothesis testing, and the extension of knowledge to new contexts.

The key is whether students are given opportunities to "absorb and digest" what they have been taught, i.e., whether they can internalize what they have learned, form hypothesis and be able to test predictions from these hypotheses – whether they are truly active learners.

If we consider the issues discussed so far carefully, we would realize that the "best practices" briefly described in section 1 can provide a good model for students to become active learners in the learning process. A strong emphasis of the proposed "best practices" is on learners as the center of instructional activities. Instead of the teacher doing most of the thinking

²⁰ We do not discuss the incorporation of language, culture and content because of the narrower focus of this work.

Obviously, the goal of language learning is for students to be able to use the target language.²⁰ Directly relating assessment to such a goal is perfor-

objectives. expected to accomplish and to provide assistance for students to achieve the learning. The teacher is a facilitator by making it clear what students are the center. A learner-centered classroom aims to foster students' active they are. What they can do is to facilitate the learning. Learners should be the process on behalf of students, no matter how enthusiastic and energetic to go through the learning process themselves. Teachers cannot go through The discussions in section 2-4 emphasize that it is the learners that need

5. Best practices

The discussions in section 2-4 emphasize that it is the learners that need position of linguistic competence, let us discuss some examples. students active participants in the learning process, key to successful acquisition and internalization of the learner's linguistic system, to making and language acquisition studies, the "best practices" are conducive to the regard to how, from the perspective of formal theoretical linguistics and second order to be more concrete so that a clearer picture can be presented in

In order to be more concrete so that a clearer picture can be presented in appropriate contexts – linguistic competence at work. (tion) plays a key role in getting students to focus on generating utterances in Performance assessment employed in the "best practices" (see the next section) important primary linguistic data for students to form their interlanguage. of the target language in a way that is comprehensible to students provides where they are really trying to express what they mean. The consistent use formed to test against further data through use of the language in contexts knowledge to their existing system and get to apply the hypothesis they have Students have ample opportunities to process the input, incorporate the new between teachers and students is always carried out in a thoughtful manner. are exposed to the target language as much as possible and the interaction and talking for students, students are the focus of the learning process. They

With the goal of the curriculum and specific objectives clearly defined, materials and activities can be designed accordingly to meet the defined objectives and goals – backward design. In order to make the learning sessions coherent and relevant to students' interest, motivating them to learn, a coherent theme should unite the lessons – thematically designed. When implementing the design, the target language should be used as much as possible so that students would be in the linguistic environment, increasing the intake of the primary linguistic data. Students would have as many opportunities as possible to actively take part in the learning process. These are exactly the principles and practices underlying the co-called "best practices" described in section 1.

Note that the best practices are still possible even in programs relying on textbooks as main course materials, as long as the instructor does not hold fast to the idea that each item in every lesson is equally important as the others and students must learn every single one of them equally well. It is important to bear in mind that not every single point in a lesson of a textbook should be emphasized and tested on. If an item is not commonly used or is tangential to the theme of the lesson, the instructor should not ask students to spend much time on it, not to mention including it in tests. After all, it probably will be forgotten soon after the test is over because of the lack of opportunities to see/hear/use it again. The key is to direct students' attention away from mechanically memorizing the individual items in each lesson for the sake of passing tests and completing the course requirement. Rather, their focus should be on learning the expressions needed to accomplish certain communicative objectives and how their objectives can be achieved.

In most of the textbooks currently available in the market, it is always possible to identify a clear theme and objectives of each lesson. The teacher just needs to organize the main points, converge them to a coherent theme (possibly with subthemes) and design lesson plans accordingly. It is fine to use a textbook, as long as it does not dictate the decisions instructors make in designing their lesson plans.

More specifically, the following steps can be considered.

-Begin with clear objectives

The first step should be to make clear to students what learning objectives are (via syllabus distributed to class and/or online posting at the class congregation site (wikispace, google doc, facebook etc.))Even in a textbook-based curriculum, it is still possible and very important to clearly identify linguistic functions as objectives, in addition to patterns and lexical items. After all, students learn patterns and expressions to be able to perform certain linguistic functions. Many current textbooks do have linguistic functions listed such as shopping, eating out, going to movies etc. Broader themes can be narrowed down to a number of subthemes so that clear scaffolding can be built up and students can better understand what they are to learn and do. For instance, when the focus of a lesson is on the construction with point-of-time expressions [Subject + Verb (+Object)], a possible objective would be to enable students to negotiate with friends on when and what to do together. Important patterns can be listed among the objectives as well; however, they should be aligned with clear examples so that abstract linguistic forms can be situated in contexts. These objectives should be clearly written and distributed or presented to students. However, there is no need for instructors to go through them, because a detailed description should be clear enough to students. Possible strategies to let students know ahead the learning objects include a daily list, writing at a corner of the board, putting up the info. on the wall in the classroom or a shared class website where students must visit.

- build the foundation

Having spelled out the objectives, teachers should prepare students to get ready for learning in class. Students without adequate knowledge of the basics - relevant words and phrases, would not be able to participate in learning activities during class. Instruction in the target language with comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) is important to increase students' exposure to the primary linguistic data. It would not be easy if students have to learn

new expressions while being asked to practice patterns with the words and phrases just taught or being taught at the same time. The task would be particularly challenging to those students who need more time to connect the form and meaning of words. The input in classrooms might be so beyond students' levels of understanding that the class experience could be frustrating and a waste of time. (Unfortunately, it has been too common for instructors to introduce new expressions and jump to pattern practices with these new items. Students struggle and the experience can be unsatisfactory to everyone.) In addition, different learners benefit more from materials learned with strategies that best fit their learning styles. Accordingly, adequate preparatory work is key to success in class meetings. The foundation preparatory work tailored to individual learners can be much more easily achieved now through online work. This is when instructors should spend a good amount of time setting up the ground work and making sure students are prepared.²¹ The quality and convenience of many online programs can facilitate the task. Interactive programs can be easily adapted these days.²²

The main point is that students should be able to take advantage of the textbook, online materials and other resources, and gain the basic knowledge ready for class activities when classes meet. It is also important that students are active learners even at this preparatory stage – they need to use their thinking and creative skills and do not just memorize items. For example, through any online program that allows a group to post messages (wikispace, google doc, facebook etc.), students can post their answers to the following questions from the instructor – what are your favorite activities on weekends? What are the routine activities in a week? What days do you have Chinese classes? What time do you go to bed on weekends?... Students should upload answers in Chinese. They find their answers through text-

²¹ Teachers would be able to recycle the materials for a number of years, which would mean less work after the first year.

²² A good example is the WillSpeak program developed by the USC Chinese language program, which allows instructors to easily design interactive activities, input new materials for students to practice etc., and also allows students to create their own works.

books, online resources, help from the instructor etc. Students are asked to read through everyone's postings. If they do not understand any of the postings, they should ask the one that posts the message or find any other way to try to understand the postings. By the end of the preparation, students should have a clear list of the vocabulary ready for class, as well as ideas about their classmates' activities and schedules. Online checking system can be set up so that each student's participation is recorded and timely feedback can be given to students.

-warm up and solidify the foundation
 After the building blocks are in place, classes will begin with warm-up activities to bring students together on the foundation. The warm-up should still be opportunities for students using the language. Again, continuing with our example, the teacher can prepare two treasure bags. The two bags each contain flash cards for activities (which can contain the relevant words/phrases and/or pictures) and time expressions that have been posted. Each student will grab a specific number of cards from each bag. Each student will have the flashcards on their desks for everyone to see. Then, they have the opportunity to keep only what they like by going around the classroom, exchanging what they have with fellow students, using classroom expressions: *wo bu xihuan X keyi gen ni huan Y ma?* 'I don't like X. May I exchange with you for Y?' The instructor is always listening in, providing appropriate assistance, including correction of mistakes. By the end of the warm-up activity, students would have a good collection of words/phrases they can put to good use.

Following the review of expressions that students should be familiar with for the session could be warm-up activities on the basic patterns, such as teachers asking students and/or students asking each other questions of the following types, depending on what they have learned before and on the appropriateness of the timing – what did you do last summer/last week/yesterday/on Monday/this morning...? What are you planning to do today/tomorrow/next week/this weekend...? Students can also interview

classmates about their favorite activities in a week, routines during a week, etc. It is important that the class moves from simpler tasks to more complex ones, from the more familiar to the newer materials and situations.

-Actively use the target language in context to achieve the planned objective
The warm-up will be followed by series of activities progressing toward meeting the objective for the unit. Each activity should begin with teacher/students modeling a few times the tasks to be carried out so that students have a clear idea of the objective of the activity and what they are expected to perform. Students then work in pairs or smaller groups and then extend the interaction to other groups, allowing them to practice similar materials with different people and in slightly different contexts. Finally, there should be feedback and wrap-up. The instructor during these activities is a facilitator - modeling, listening, helping and intervention.²³ In many cases, a successful task would also require students to use what they have learned before, not just what they are focusing on for the unit. Nonetheless, this is good, because this is how language is used spontaneously.

Let us continue with the example of learning to negotiate with friends on when and what to do, a linguistic focus being the positioning of time words.

The instructor would first work with a student to model how the negotiation can carry on, including finding out when each other has time and what each other would like to do together. Several modeling activities on similar topics might be needed so that students understand clearly what they are expected to do. After a few examples, students, having built the foundation of the needed linguistic expressions, form pairs to carry out the task of negotiating when and what to do. The activity can be extended to apply to similar but new situations such as finding more people to join in the agreed upon activity by talking to them about the plan and possibly involving further negotiation.

²³Gass and Selinker (2008, 372): With Examples from Swain and Lapkin (1998, p.329), they showed that "even though the classroom is a place where conversational interaction can often provide opportunities for learning, an important caveat is in order – teacher intervention is often essential."

tion to settle on a plan agreeable to all. Then, the instructor will bring the activities to an end by asking representatives to tell the class what they are planning to do at what time. It would be even better if students indeed carry out the plan and return to class to tell the class or submit a report on what they did when. Such a report allows students to review what they have learned without feeling that they are reviewing. They are reporting about actual events. The language is used completely outside the frame of prior learning; they generate utterances according to their mental grammar.

Further note that, if there is explicit teaching of grammar, it takes place at the preparatory stage through online practices and other available resources. The valuable class time is devoted to students testing what they have understood and learning from actually using the language in varieties of contexts. The preparatory stage depends heavily on the materials made available to the students; the presentation of the materials for the preparatory practices should be very well-organized, focused and goal-oriented. The insight from theoretical studies can also be incorporated. For instance, we discussed the notions of micro and macro parameters – essentially learners use the same strategy to analyze clusters of similar patterns. To facilitate students' realizing similarities between patterns or differences cross-linguistically and applying the same strategy to integrate the new information to their existing knowledge, the materials can be presented in such a way that the characteristics of the patterns are highlighted. Take for example the macro-parameter of analysis vs. synthesis and the related micro-parameter regarding the property of *wh*-expressions, it would be helpful to introduce *wh*-words used as existential or universal expressions with their related words *you* 'have' and *don* 'all'. That is, the co-occurrence of *do/you* and *wh*-words can be highlighted in the input to students. Lexical items like *xue* should not be translated as 'learn' but as 'study'. It is also important to list *xue-hui* together with *xue* and other similar pairs such as *ting* 'listen' vs. *ting-fan* 'hear', *kan* 'watch' vs. *kan-fan* 'see' can be presented in a similar

manner.²⁴ In short, materials can be prepared in such a way that the characteristics are obvious. Clear input can be made without lots of explanations from instructors, as students themselves are the ones that need to process the new information and internalize the new knowledge. There is no need for a lot of "teaching" (teachers talking and thinking for students) at any stage of the learning process. Instead, students should be the focus; they are actively participating and using the language to achieve planned objectives from the beginning to the end.

Finally, at the end of a unit, students can perform summative tasks to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they have developed.

6. Conclusion

This work aims to further mutual understanding and clarify shared conceptions about language and language acquisition among theoretical linguists, language acquisition specialists and language instruction professionals. It argues that theoretical research can contribute to the characterization of important principles underlying effective language instruction. According to the perspective of formal linguistic studies and of second language acquisition research, learners should be the focus, the center of the learning process. Truly active learners make learning successful. They need ample opportunities to process what they are exposed to, to internalize what is learned and apply the internalized system to new situations. They should be allowed to form their hypotheses according to input and to test predictions from hypotheses. In addition, learners should be in the environment of the target language due to the critical role of primary linguistic data to hypothesis generation and testing. These theoretical considerations actually underlie the working of the "best practices" currently advocated in the US, as summarized in (1-3) in section 1. An important lesson many language professionals have learned over the years is that instructors might spend much time and

²⁴ This does not mean that all of these need to be introduced simultaneously. After students learn a strategy, he can apply the same strategy to other similar cases at a later time.

energy organizing a very well-structured class but students might not benefit as much as hoped for. When the instructor is the center in the process, explicitly guiding students every step of the way, students would have fewer opportunities to be active learners.

Nonetheless, this paper is not to deny the important teaching by instructors. Explicit teaching about the target language can be quite beneficial and help students understand the “peculiarities” of the target language in many cases. For instance, the rule regarding the tone change of *bu* ‘not’ can be useful and textbooks also often list such a rule (its taking the second tone when directly followed by a fourth tone; otherwise, the fourth tone). It is not the core property of human languages nor that of Chinese to require such a tone changing rule, because there are many other multiple fourth tone combinations.²⁵ There are other peculiarities in regard to pronunciation, lexical use, phrase and sentence choices, which can be explained clearly in a few words or a few sentences. Learners can find such explicit rules and teaching very useful. They will have opportunities to integrate such useful information to the system of their existing knowledge. This paper is also not to dictate what to teach and what not to teach about the target language. The purpose is to highlight the importance of giving students more opportunities to absorb and digest what they are exposed to, more opportunities to use the language spontaneously (outside the mode of instruction). Students themselves have to go through the learning process; teachers cannot do the learning for their students. Students need to be encouraged to become active learners, the point made according to the studies of theoretical linguistic and second language acquisition research.

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²⁵ Minimal pairs can also be easily found, such as *bu(2) hui(4)* ‘unable’ vs. *bu(4) hui(4)* ‘ministries’.

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關鍵詞：形式語法 內化語言系統 中介語 最佳教學 法語法教學

本文強調理論語言學，語言習得和語言教學可以有也是應該有的對語言的共同基本觀念-語言能力是語言使用者根據語料將語言規律內化於腦中的語言系統。這個基本觀念能使我們更清楚地看到語言學習過程應該是以學習者為中心，而不是教師，也認識到豐富的目標語料對語言學習的重要。這能促成較有效的課程設計，並且採用更合適的教學法。本文將簡要描述現今美國外語教學大力提倡的「最佳教學實踐」的主要理念和手段，然後闡明這些理念和手段其實正與形式理論語言學以及相關的第二語言習得理論的論點不謀而合。最後舉出一些實例來介紹如何能實際運用這些理念和手段於語言課堂。

摘要

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