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Does practice make perfect? It all depends…

Abstract

This article distils key insights from second language acquisition research for practising language teachers who are not intimately familiar with the field. The focus is on practice by language learners and starts from the obvious assumption that teachers would readily agree that learners need to practise what they are taught in order to acquire it. However, it is less obvious why practice is important, what actually happens during practice, what aspects of language to practise, how best to design opportunities for practice and how to determine the best timing. Focusing specifically on the acquisition of grammatical structure, this article presents theoretically-based answers to these questions, drawn from relevant strands in the broader area of second language learning research. Ideas are presented from a historical perspective to illuminate their origins and interconnectedness. Key concepts elaborated include: the different roles of practising receptive versus productive skills; the key importance of practising in the context of interactive communicative activities and tasks; the roles of corrective feedback, prompts and priming in these contexts, as well as the optimal timing for practice in the light of research on development in language learning.

1. Introduction

If we were asked whether we think it important that our learners practise what we have taught them, we would be likely to reply 'Yes, of course!'. But, the important questions are not only why, but also, what, how and when to practise. There is much research on these questions individually but, so far, this has not been drawn together in one place for the practising language teacher. Following a brief overview of the role of practice in language teaching and what actually happens when learners practise, I will look for answers to these questions from a wide range of research in language learning and teaching and try to convey a sense of how ideas developed to what we know today. Within the scope of this article, references will be selective and include early seminal works, which were key in bringing in new perspectives. For the busy teacher interested in the field of second language learning more widely than just practice and the acquisition of grammar, I recommend Lightbown and Spada (2013) as highly accessible further reading.

1.1 The role of practice in language teaching

The role of practice in language learning has a variable history. Practice played a central role in the theory of Behaviourism (Skinner 1938, 1957), which informed

language teaching for many years, as embodied in the Audio-Lingual Method developed in the 1940s (Fries 1945; Lado 1964). The goal of the method was to achieve an *automatized* command of vocabulary and the grammatical 'patterns' of the language through 'overlearning'. Imitation and repetition were seen as the key methodological tools. To this effect, sentences were 'drilled', first verbatim then with substitution of vocabulary in specific 'slots' of the grammatical pattern(s) (Lado 1964: 103). However, subsequent research showed that the skills obtained this way were short-lived (Lightbown 1983; Lightbown and Spada 2013: 158) and of limited use when it came to communicating outside the classroom (Savignon 1972, 1983).

The importance of practice in language teaching took on a different dimension with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching, which focused on learning the target language by using it for communicative purposes. This approach to teaching was based on the concept of 'communicative competence' (Hymes 1964, 1971), i.e. knowing not only the structures of the language but also how to use language appropriately in communicative contexts. The principles of the communicative approach, which in the 1970s inspired teachers in Europe and America alike (Paulston and Bruder 1976; Piepho 1974), are still mainstream today. In this context, practice is no longer seen in terms of imitating and repeating isolated sentences, but in terms of learners creating culturally-appropriate utterances in communicative contexts.

Since the 1970s there has been no further fundamental shift in the role of practice in language teaching. However, since then, research at the intersection of learning and teaching has been fleshing out the communicative paradigm with respect to pragmatics, culture, modes of language use and language structure. This article focuses on the last topic, investigating the role of practice in grammar learning in communicative contexts. Before broaching the questions of why, what, how and when to practise for grammar learning, we will first determine what actually constitutes practice for learning.

1.2 What is practice?

Practice in essence is repetition of something done before. Importantly, we generally expect that practice will help us at least improve if not make us perfect (De Keyser 2007: 1). What makes this possible? Psycholinguistic research hypothesizes that, through repetition, connections formed in the brain are being strengthened and activated with increasing ease (Anderson 1992; Paradis 2004). However, repetition should involve more than simply copying. According to sociolinguistic research, practice is a purposeful activity, in which we aim at doing it better each time we try. In doing so we constantly move the goalpost, as each subsequent (rather than first) try serves as our yard-stick to ensure that we improve (Lantolf 2006: 91).

2. Why practise?

Why is practice important? Communicating through language is an enormously complex skill, which native speakers of a language carry out rapidly, without appearing

to exert much effort or having even to think about it. In fact, thinking about how to say it slows them down. Research in psycholinguistics (e.g. Kormos 2006; Levelt 1989) talks about attentional resources to explain why practice is needed for fluency. When native speakers communicate they need to pay attention only to planning and monitoring what they want to say, the rest is virtually automatic. In contrast, second language learners need to attend to other components as well, such as recalling (new) words, adding appropriate grammatical affixes and arranging words into appropriate phrase and sentence structures. Because the processing of these components is not automatized, learners need to attend to all of these. Because learners' attentional resources are limited, they can only spread them thinly. This makes their speech hesitant and much slower than that of a native speaker. Practice promotes automatization of such components and thus advances fluency.

3. What to practise?

After the era of Behaviourism and the Audio-Lingual Method, which advocated drilling of grammatical patterns, the first impetus for what to practise came from research in the 1960s on infants learning their native language. The research discovered that, on their learning path, learners created their own hypotheses about the structure of the language and progressed with astonishing similarity, guided by a 'built-in' syllabus as it were (Brown 1973: 315). The research on first language acquisition gave rise to follow-up studies, which found that the same was true for second language learners and that the syllabus was similar but not identical (Dulay and Burt 1974). They coined the term 'creative construction' for the learner's use of this innate or 'built-in' syllabus.

3.1 The roles of listening and reading

Following from this theory of 'creative construction' in language learning, Krashen's Monitor Model (Krashen 1981, 1982, 1985) had a great impact on foreign language teaching, particularly in the US. Krashen hypothesized that there are two ways of language learning, each leading to a different type of language knowledge. He proposed that the primary and best way is learning incidentally, as infants do, without focusing on what we are actually learning. Such implicitly *acquired* language 'competence' (Chomsky 1958) is robust and needed for fluency. Krashen saw teaching grammar rules explicitly as dispensable, because knowledge *learned* this way cannot lead to fluency; at best it can help learners 'monitor' and self-correct what they are about to say. The Monitor Model thus assumed that classroom learners would acquire the target language simply by practising lots of listening and reading, provided they were able to understand what they heard and read, and that such 'comprehensible input' contained structures and vocabulary slightly beyond the learner's current level. According to Krashen, teaching grammar or getting learners to speak or write in the language was not necessary; all students needed to do was practise receptive skills, i.e. listening and reading.

Krashen's model was implemented in the well-known Canadian immersion experiments where English-speaking students learned French by being taught other subjects *through* French rather than being taught the language directly (Swain 1985, 1988). The immersion students became very fluent, not only in reading and writing, but also in speaking. However, they continued to make many errors even after six or seven years of instruction through French. The researchers in charge of the experiment therefore concluded that abundant exposure to the language through listening and reading was beneficial, but not enough if students were to achieve fluency *and* accuracy.

The outcomes of the immersion studies unleashed a wealth of theoretical and empirical research on language learning and teaching, focusing on how the lack of accuracy in learners' production could be explained and performance improved, as we will see in the following.

One important insight has been that comprehension in listening and reading can often be achieved by attending only to meaning and contextual cues and simply ignoring any grammatical detail. When this happens, the formal aspects of the language are not 'taken in' and therefore cannot become part of the knowledge that feeds language production (Swain and Lapkin 1995). Such shallow processing is not possible, however, when linguistic form is crucial in determining the core meaning. One way of getting the learner to attend to form while listening or reading is by designing so-called 'input processing' tasks (Chaudron 1985; Van Patten 1996, 2004). Such tasks require the learner to process the meaning of certain formal features contained in what they hear or read if they are to complete the task successfully. For example, in a card activity with cards depicting single and multiple coloured objects, when asked '*Do you have the card with the red balls?'* the student needs to process the plural marker, if they are to pick out the correct card, i.e. when having to select between the card with several red balls and the one with a single red ball.

3.2 The roles of speaking and writing

Unless students engage in specially-designed input processing tasks, they can get by with largely ignoring grammatical aspects in what they hear or read. This is not possible, however, when they are to engage in (creative) language production. Speaking or writing in the target language by necessity must involve at least some attention to form. This is one of the principles of the 'output hypothesis' developed by Merrill Swain, the leading researcher in the Canadian immersion programs (Swain 1985, 1995). Swain found that the low degree of accuracy in immersion students' speech and writing may be attributable to the fact that they were given rather few opportunities to speak or write. She hypothesized that it is crucial for learners to engage in language *production* if they are to become more accurate. One reason for this is that expression necessarily involves 'syntactic' rather than only 'semantic' processing: meaning needs to be cast in form and the forms must be arranged in an appropriate sequence. Learners need to go through the entire procedure of speech production, from conceptualisation to articulation.

Thus, practice in the 'four skills' is important. However, in addition to the obvious needs for learning to speak, understand, read and write as such, practice in the receptive skills of listening and reading will lead to fluency, while the productive skills of speaking and writing are needed to attain fluency *and* accuracy. In addition, specifically-designed input-processing activities can enhance accuracy in specific structures. However, the four skills do not exist in isolation. This brings us to the question of how to practise.

4. How to practise?

The question of how best to practise is at the core of current research in the intersecting area of language teaching and learning. The overarching view is still that if learners are to become able to *communicate* appropriately in the language, they need to practise in communicative contexts (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell 1995; Doughty and Williams 1998b); Savignon 2001; Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor 2006). These require the integration of a range of skills, which include linguistic skills (of speaking, listening, reading and writing), intercultural skills, pragmatic skills, as well as strategic skills to use their limited abilities to maximal communicative effect. This article concentrates on linguistic skills, more specifically, on the acquisition of grammar through oral interaction.

4.1 Oral interaction and feedback

A key early insight from psycholinguistic as well as sociocultural theory is that practice in *interactive* communicative contexts is at the core of language learning. Both paradigms focus on the role of feedback in oral interaction (Hatch 1974; Vygotsky 1978) but in different terms and from different theoretical perspectives.

4.1.1 Socio-cultural theory

At the core of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1978; Lantolf 2006) is the idea that learners may initially only achieve a goal with help or guidance of an expert but that guidance must be delivered in such a way that it empowers the learner to eventually achieve the goal independently. Such expert's 'scaffolding' needs to be self-fulfilling in this sense. Scaffolding may be provided in the form of co-constructing or helping when students carry out a task in the target language, for example, by giving them parts of questions for an interview task before they are able to formulate them entirely on their own, i.e. she has been able to 'appropriate' it, because acquiring the form was within her 'zone of proximal development'.

The following example from research data on tutor-feedback on a learner's English as a Second Language (ESL) writing shows the tutor providing increasingly explicit scaffolding feedback in trying to reach the learner's 'zone of proximal development', i.e. the point where the learner can discover the errors on her own (Aljaafreh and Lantolf 1994: 478). When, after the third attempt, the learner is still

unable to correct the error on her own, the tutor finally supplies the form for her. The scaffoldings in the example target tense errors in the phrase '*can't lived*', specifically the present tense of the modal '*can*', in the learner's sentence '*In that moment I can't lived in the house because I didn't have any furniture*', which the tutor reads out to the learner. The study shows that in later instances of scaffolding on similar errors the learner is eventually able to supply the form on her own. Below, key parts in the tutor's scaffolding and final supply of the form '*could*' are underlined for clarity. The initial numbers refer to line numbers extracted from the transcript.

4-6.	T:	What is wrong with the sentence we just read ? . . . Do you see?
7.	F:	No
8-10.	T:	there is something wrong with the verb with the verb tense in this sentence and the modal . . .
13.	F:	The tense of this live
20-21.	T:	the event happened in the past right? So what is the past tense of this verb can ? . . . Do you know ?
22.	F:	No
23.	T:	Okay, ah could

4.1.2 Psycholinguistic research

Psycholinguistic research hypothesizes that when learners interact orally, they are likely to receive feedback from their interlocutor(s), when they do not succeed in getting their message across (e.g. Gass and Varonis, 1994; Hatch 1974; Long 1983; Mackey and Philp, 1998). It is believed that this may lead to an exchange in which 'meaning is negotiated' (Long 1996), involving some attention to form, as illustrated by this excerpt from research data on learner Spanish (Gass, Mackey and Ross-Feldman 2005: 586; the feedback is underlined here):

Learner 1	"*¿Que es importante a ella?*" [What is important to her?]
Learner 2	"*¿Como?*" [What?]
Learner 1	"*¿Que es importante a la amiga? ¿Es solo el costo*"?
	[What is important to the friend? Is it just the cost?]

Negotiation of meaning is considered important as it is likely to contain feedback that 'pushes' the learner into making their 'output' more precise, requiring attention to form as it relates to meaning. It is also believed that negotiation of meaning can lead a learner to 'notice a gap' between what they said and ought to have said to get the meaning across more successfully (e.g. Izumi, Bigelow, Fujiwara and Fearnow 1999). Interactive settings may furthermore provide opportunities for learners to 'test their hypotheses' about the language, as revealed in the example below of the recall by a learner of Italian of what happened when the interlocutor did not understand what

she was trying to say (Gass and Mackey 2007: 180; the relevant part in the learner's recall is underlined below):

(INT = interviewer; NNS = learner)

NNS: *poi un bicchiere* [then a glass]

INT: *un che, come*? [a what, what?]

NNS: *bicchiere* [glass]

NNS Recall Comments: "*I was drawing a blank. Then I thought of a vase but then I thought that since there was no flowers, maybe it was just a big glass. So, then I thought <u>I'll say it and see</u>*."

Feedback is furthermore considered crucial for providing learners with 'negative evidence' (a need not arising for first language learners), when a feature in the learner's native language is not grammatical in the target language, rendering the learner's utterance inaccurate. For example, adverb placement between the verb and the direct object is grammatical in French, but not in English, e.g. '*Marie regarde souvent la television*', but not '*Mary watches often television*' (White 1991: 135). Production without feedback cannot be effective in these cases, because the lack of the feature in the target language requires the learner to notice something that is absent.

4.2 Teacher feedback

While peer feedback in communicative settings typically occurs incidentally, teacher feedback can be more systematic and targeted. There is a great deal of ongoing research in this area, which is referred to as 'Focus on Form' (FonF), a term coined by Michael Long in the context of his work on syllabus construction (Doughty and Williams 1998b; Long 1991; Long and Crookes 1992). Long distinguished syllabi structured around grammar points, 'Focus on FormS' (FonFS), from those which are structured in terms of meaning, 'Focus on Meaning' (FonM). In its purest form, FonF is a variant of the FonM syllabus in the sense that, under FonF, in addition to meaning some attention to formal aspects of the language is included to achieve not only fluency and idiomaticity, but also accuracy in learners' utterances. The goal of FonF methodology is to attract the learner's attention *briefly* to form *while* they are *using* the language (receptively or productively), so as not to interrupt the flow of meaning (Doughty 2002; Long 1991). This overall focus on meaning is important because, in line with Krashen, FonF research holds that learners can only acquire forms if their overall focus remains on meaning.

4.2.1 Recasts

In research on FonF the technique of 'recasting', i.e. rephrasing a learner's incorrect utterance into a correct one, has received much attention (see Nicholas, Lightbown and Spada 2001 for an overview). Recasts can be quite implicit or more explicit, as

the following examples from research data show (Nassaji 2009: 430) and may or may not be followed by 'uptake' on the part of the learner:

Implicit recast + uptake:

Student   *She saw young woman*.

Teacher   *Oh, she saw the young woman*. [recast]

Student   *Yeah*. [uptake]

More explicit recast + uptake:

Student   *A woman and a man was walking through the sidewalk*.

Teacher   *A man and a woman WERE* [added stress] *walking*? [recast]

Student   *Yeah, were walking together*. [uptake]

Because recasts are contingent on meaning but intended to focus on form, they are inherently ambiguous. If the student in the first recast above has not taken in the article (but focused instead, for example, on the teacher's surprise) the recast will have failed its goal. If they have taken it in, and the uptake acknowledges the teacher's correction, the technique will have succeeded (unless from this point on the learner starts listening for articles, rather than attending to meaning).

While research in the area of FonF-type feedback is ongoing, it is also increasingly criticized, not only with respect to problems arising from the ambiguity of recasts and variability in the occurrence of uptake but also because uptake does not guarantee that the learner actually recasts their own utterance (e.g. Lyster and Ranta 1997). It is more likely the case that the learner will simply mimic the teacher's recast, without going through the entire procedure of speech production, which, as we saw earlier (under 3.2), is advocated by the output hypothesis. In this context calls have been made for techniques which get the learner to conceptualize and produce utterances on their own (Lyster 2004). These are commonly referred to as prompts, which we will turn to next.

4.2.2 Prompts

Following on from the output hypothesis, researchers have also begun investigating the efficacy of 'prompts', a form of teacher feedback in meaning-focused discourse, whereby learners are pushed to actually produce the correct form or phrasing on their own. Lyster (2004: 405) distinguishes at least four types of prompts and exemplifies them with respect to gender marking in French article forms as follows. The prompts in Lyster's examples are underlined:

1. *Clarification requests* … used to indicate that the student's message has been either misunderstood or ill-formed …:

Student: *Et le coccinelle …* "And the (M) ladybug."

Teacher: <u>*Pardon*</u>? "Sorry?"

Student: *La coccinelle …* "The (F) ladybug"

2. *Repetitions* ... usually with rising intonation and stress to highlight the error ...:

Student:	*La chocolat ...* "(F) Chocolate."
Teacher:	*La chocolat*? "(F) Chocolate?"
Student:	Le chocolat. "(M) Chocolate."

3. *Metalinguistic clues* ...related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance...:

Student:	*Parce qu'elle cherche, euh, son, son carte.*
	"Because she's looking for, um, her, her (M) card."
Teacher:	*Pas son carte.* "Not her (M) card."
Student:	*Euh, sa carte*? "Uhm, her (F) card?"

4. *Elicitations* ... entails direct questions such as "How do we say that in French?" or pauses that allow students to complete the teacher's utterance ...:

Teacher:	*Il vit où un animal domestique? Où est-ce que* ça *vit?*
	"Where does a pet live? Where does it live?
Student:	*Dans un maison.* "In a (M) house."
Teacher:	*Dans ...* ? *Attention*. "In ... ? Careful."
Student:	*Dans une maison.* "In a (F) house."

4.3 Form-focused input

Whether recasts or prompts, teacher feedback in communicative settings is essentially responsive in nature and as such representative of a 're-active' approach to FonF (Doughty and Williams 1998a; Lyster and Ranta 1997). A more pro-active approach is taken where the focus is on the discourse that serves as learner input, rather than just responding to learners' production. As we have seen, students will tend to ignore grammatical features in comprehension activities, unless these are somehow made salient. With respect to form-focused input, it is important to distinguish between input-oriented techniques, aimed at the provision of input as such and output-oriented techniques, where the input is to affect the learner's output directly.

Teacher-feedback and input-oriented approaches together have been captured under the wider umbrella term of 'form-focused instruction', i.e. "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to form". (Ellis 2001: 1-2; see also Spada 1997 and Norris and Ortega 2000). The overall rationale of form-focused instruction is to make the grammatical elements of the language more 'salient' so the learners get to 'notice' these, which, according to Schmidt's (1990) 'noticing hypothesis' is a pre-requisite for acquiring them.

4.3.1 Input enhancement

One, unobtrusive, way of achieving salience using input-oriented techniques is simply by selecting discourse which is naturally dense in the targeted feature, for example, in the case of past tense marking, using genres such as reports or stories.

A more obtrusive way of achieving this is through so-called 'input enhancement', whereby salience is created by actually manipulating the discourse. The target usage may be stressed in speech or printed in bold such as, for example, in research on pronoun forms in ESL (White 1998) or gender marking in French article forms (e.g. Lyster 2004).

4.3.2 Priming

A more recent approach in the exploration of output-oriented techniques is research spearheaded by Kim McDonough into so-called 'priming' or 'syntactic priming' in oral interaction (McDonough 2006; McDonough and Mackey 2008). This research connects to Swain's output hypothesis (see section 3.2) on the one hand and to research into acquisition stages (see section 5) on the other. Its central aim is to induce the learner subconsciously to produce structures of a higher stage than they may be inclined to use. The key mechanism in these experiments is so-called 'priming', i.e. a learner's tendency to use a structure they have just heard rather than a lower-level structure that they could have used instead. In the experiments, one of the interlocutors has been 'scripted' (i.e. secretly instructed) to begin the conversation with a higher-level question and to use such questions as often as possible during the conversation. The following example of primed production stems from research on the acquisition of ESL why-questions requiring do-support (the highest level) (McDonough and Mackey, 2008: 39; the questions involved in the priming and the primed learner result are underlined here):

Scripted interlocutor: *Why did you decide to work in Bangkok*?

Participant: uh because I would like to study master degree in Bangkok// *what do you like to do in your free time*?

Priming occurs at a very abstract level. As the example shows, the question uttered by the learner (Participant) is entirely different from its prime (lexically, as well as in tense) but appears to be produced by applying the same structural rule (do-support). The effect of priming can persist over several intervening turns, as the following example from the same research (McDonough and Mackey, 2008: 39) illustrates.

Scripted interlocutor: *What subject did you take*?

Participant: *I study biotechnology*

Researcher: *Sounds very difficult*

Participant: *yeah*

Scripted interlocutor: *You must be smart*

Participant: uh *where did you stay at uh six o'clock pm*?

While this research is still in the experimental stage, priming is an important example of input designed to connect directly to learner output. This approach would therefore be well worth exploring further in classroom-based research, either in terms of teacher input or in designing tasks for multi-level settings.

The study from which the above examples are taken (McDonough and Mackey 2008) found that priming works (75% of primes resulted in production of the higher rather than lower-level questions). Importantly, a key outcome of this study was that in comparison to a control group, many more students advanced from a lower to a higher stage after completion of the priming activities. This brings us to the question of when practising is most fruitful.

5. When to practise?

A crucial point flowing from theories which take a developmental perspective on language learning is that practice or feedback, in whatever form, cannot lead to learning unless the learner 'is ready' in the sense that they are able to assimilate what's being taught and practised. This insight is espoused by sociocultural and psycholinguistic research alike. Sociocultural theory requires that scaffolding be provided in the learners' 'zone of proximal development', that is at a point when they are able to appropriate the help from an expert for the purpose of their own learning (see section 4.1.1).

Not surprisingly, a wide range of studies has found that language learning is a stepwise, cumulative process (e.g. Pienemann 1998, 2005a; Di Biase 2002a). Maybe less surprisingly, research has also found that teaching and feedback will not lead to learning if the learner is not 'ready', i.e. there is a strict order to these stages and when stages are skipped or the order of these stages is reversed (Mansouri and Duffy 2005), learning is impaired. In addition, research has shown that where teaching and feedback are in step with the learner-internal syllabus, progress accelerates, as was the case in the priming studies presented in the previous section. Thus, practice and feedback can only be effective if they focus on the current or next step in the learners' development, but not beyond.

If we are to tailor our teaching to our students' readiness, we need to know how we can determine when a learner is 'ready'. A great deal of research is conducted to find out what the learning stages/steps are and there are already results for a considerable range of languages, (mostly learned in school and university classrooms). These include Arabic, Chinese, English, German, Italian, Japanese and Swedish (see e.g. Di Biase 2002b and Pienemann 2005b for overviews). However, much more is still to be done in this area, theoretically as well as experimentally (Bettoni and Di Biase, in press). So the question is whether we, as teachers can wait?

I believe that, given the general idea and specific evidence to date, we can also draw on our own teaching experience. For example, structures that we need to revisit year after year are likely to be those that learners are *not* yet ready for. As research has shown (e.g. Pienemann 1998, 2005a), such structures may, for example, involve

complex form-function relationships, such as combined marking of gender, number and/or case of articles and adjectives. Structures with 'counter-intuitive' grammar are another example, such as when the subject of a sentence follows the verb, or the direct object precedes the verb, rather than vice versa, or where the subject expresses the recipient rather than the agent of the action, as happens in passive constructions or with verbs like '*receive*'.

In addition to features that we know from experience are not acquired until later, we can also look out for positive signs of readiness. The most conspicuous sign of incipient learning to look out for is when learners *spontaneously* start using a structure *systematically* and *appropriately*. Longitudinal research (e.g. Baten 2013; Di Biase 2008; Kawaguchi 2010) has shown that once a structure has 'emerged' in learners' *spontaneous* speech (i.e. when focusing on meaning), it tends to remain and increase in frequency, provided that opportunities for its use continue. Without such reinforcing practice, the learner may fall back on easier structures in time-constrained settings, such as natural communication outside the classroom, even after the structure has emerged (but see Pienemann 1998: 256). For example, they may use the active voice in place of its passive counterpart even when the passive is communicatively more appropriate. Targeting emerged structures for practice and feedback at the point of emergence can thus stimulate and accelerate learning.

A further example of readiness to look out for is when, seemingly inexplicably, *new* errors appear that weren't made before. Such errors may actually be a sign that the learner is just about, or in the process of *learning* something, particularly if the errors involve omission of items or some type of overgeneralization (see Pienemann 1998: 264). For example, when irregular verb forms (e.g. '*went*'), that used to be produced accurately, suddenly appear with regular endings attached (i.e. '*wented*' or '*goed*'), this may indicate that the learner is appropriating a rule for the past-tense, which s/he is now overextending to irregular forms. What to do with such new errors? First of all, in this example we can check the learner's use of the past-tense marker on regular verbs to ascertain whether the marker appears only sporadically, a sign that it has only just emerged or whether it is already well-established. If the marker has only just emerged, this would be a good point for practice and error correction of regular verbs, while ignoring the overgeneralization errors on the irregulars. On the other hand, if there appear to be no major problems with the regular verbs, this may be a good point to start focusing on the irregular verbs to help learners acquire the exceptions to the rule.

6. Conclusion

I have reviewed a range of theoretical and empirical perspectives on the need for learners to practise, what they need to practise and why, as well as how and under which circumstances we can expect practice to achieve maximal benefit. This article reaffirms that learners cannot learn without practising and explains why practice is essential. We have seen that practising receptive skills such as listening and reading fosters fluency but not always accuracy. Evidence presented here suggests

that accuracy requires practising speaking and writing, particularly in the context of communicative interactive tasks. Optimally, such practice would need to be enhanced through form-focused feedback or input *during* language comprehension or production and without interrupting the overall focus on meaning. Such form-focused instruction should not be indiscriminate but target only forms or structures for which the learner is ready.

Thus, practice alone is not enough. Learners need to be 'pushed', if they are to develop. The need for pushing the learner is one thread that links many different strands of research drawn together in this article. Learners are pushed when, in the context of Behaviourism, the drilling gets faster and new words are cued for substitution in the pattern. Reading and listening, in the context of Krashen's model, need to reach or push beyond the learners' current level. Input processing pushes learners to process aspects of grammar, which they might otherwise ignore during comprehension. Learners need to be pushed, not only to listen and read, but also to speak and write. Form-focused feedback and input push the learner further, to express themselves more clearly and accurately. In the context of socio-cultural theory, scaffolding must push the learner to become independent of it and must be successively withdrawn to meet its purpose.

However, pushing will be effective *only* if the learner is 'ready'. This is probably the most important point for us teachers. If we push our learners to where they cannot yet go we are not only wasting the little time we have in the classroom but we are likely to de-motivate our learners in the process. Therefore, calling it 'pushing' may be the wrong way of putting it, if this means we push beyond the point of our learners' readiness. Rather than pushing forcefully, we need to egg our learners on, coaxing them gently but firmly, into new spaces where they can develop and grow.

Finally, it is important to stress that theory and research can add to, but not substitute for, the wealth of experience gained from teachers' own practice within the complex web of variables that makes up the reality of language classrooms.

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