

3.4 Accelerating input and exposure in the English language classroom

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The context

In Spain, during the late 1990s, the English language competency level among the country's citizens was trailing that of the rest of Europe (Bonnet 2000). The rapid increase in the number of private English language academies in the country reflected parents' concerns and demands for teaching their children better communicative skills. This was the English language learning climate I encountered when I opened an academy in Seville in 1995. I worked closely with my teachers in exploratory classroom research to find an alternative to grammar and text-based learning methods prevalent in Spanish state primary schools and instead to emphasise English exposure through oral practice.

Origins and development

We first experimented with the picture-word technique developed by William Chuckney called the Skeleton Approach (1987), where a flashcard represented each word of a sentence and the cards were presented in front of the class for uttering. We then went a step further and transferred the visual referent from a picture-on-a-card to a hand gesture. This new approach allowed for faster input and eliciting of lexis in the classroom: a direct cause and effect, a kinaesthetic reaction to meaning similar to the dynamic of the Total Physical Response tool. The significant deviation from Asher's approach, however, is that the teacher's silent gestures elicit students' gestures *plus* the utterance, one gesture per word-meaning, rather than call upon students to carry out actions via spoken imperatives. We devised over two thousand iconic and representational gestures and set them down in a dictionary.

The rationale behind the benefit of gestures is that beginner students are exposed to and participate in holistic oral language (English in full spoken sentences) while being able to focus on a sentence's separate lexical parts. Gestures become the principal conveyor of meaning in the classroom and text becomes unnecessary in its all too common role as a facilitator of material for speaking activities.

The nature of a gesture class

I showed the workshop participants a video from a recent gesture lesson. The group of students involved were nine year olds from a primary school near Seville, CEIP Pedro Primero. The school took part in a collaborative research project with Seville University into the use of gesture in the English language classroom. The experimental group of 19 students received gesture-based classes during the academic year of 2014–2015 and were compared with peer control groups. Pre-tests and post-tests on oral competence were carried out on all groups.

The video demonstrated the technique used to present and elicit English L2 through gestures. Firstly, the teacher showed the students a picture projected onto a screen at the front of the class, which was taken from a short humorous story. The teacher presented new language orally using the picture and for each word presented

performed an iconic gesture. The students imitated the gestures and uttered the words. No words were written. After this presentation phase, the teacher then said to the students: ‘Tell me the story.’ This following technique is called ‘silent sign’. The teacher proceeded to gesture the words of the story in silence. In chorus, the students called out the words while gesturing—word by word, sentence by sentence to the end of the story. The teacher spoke only to read back each sentence after the students had uttered it or briefly clear up language doubts.

Gesture: the ultimate cloze exercise

The conference participants were asked to answer questions on a handout while watching the video and give their verdicts at the end. One of the questions was: ‘How many gaps did students fill during the cloze test?’ It was concluded that as the students had to comprehend each gesture and utter the corresponding word, and there were 160 words in the story, 160 gaps had been filled in a space of six minutes.

Another question was: ‘How were students exposed to grammar?’ Some participants had perceived that the *same* gesture represented all parts of a verb and that the students were required to conjugate from context and utter the verb in the correct person, present or past tense.

Krashen and Terrell say that ‘the ability to speak fluently and easily in a second language emerges by itself after a sufficient amount of competence has been acquired through input’ (2000: 20). Indeed, this ‘emergence’ from minimal explicit instruction but heightened and accelerated comprehended input is the strategy being researched here.

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References

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