Sabbatical Leave Taken
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Effective Input Design for Language Learning

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Subject and Objectives. On my last sabbatical, I began developing a preliminary model of second language acquisition within a human linguistics (a.k.a., hard-science linguistics, or HSL) framework (Yngve, 1996). I have made some conference presentations (Coleman 2004, Coleman et al. 2006, Coleman & Postica 2006, Coleman et al. 2009, Coleman and Paiz 2010, Coleman et al. 2011, Coleman 2013) and published some papers that followed up on that work (Coleman 2005, 2006, 2007, Coleman et al. 2007, Postica & Coleman 2006, Coleman et al. 2007, Coleman To Appear). This time around, I focused more narrowly on my interest in the predictions an HSL theory makes in regard to how people learn to communicate as they apply to the most effective design of input for learners.

My work has been based on the realization that the ancient logical abstractions of words and grammar do not provide useful, real-world means to evaluate language curricula. This is why I have based my work on the foundations of Human (a.k.a.,"Hard-Science") Linguistics, which deals instead with people communicating in their physical environment, rather than on logical (presupposed) abstractions (Yngve, 1996).

Significance. Up to now, the development of classroom almost all materials for language learning has been hampered by the theoretical foundations on which it is based. Perhaps the most influential proponent of input-based language-teaching methods (as opposed to methods of grammatical explanation) is Stephen Krashen. Krashen(1985)
proposed a set of hypotheses, central to them being the Input / Comprehension
Hypothesis. (It is worthy of note that this is still called the "Input / Comprehension
Hypothesis", not "Theory", almost three decades after he first proposed it.) Krashen
asserts that the learner must have other sensory experience in parallel to language input
(though he does not call this other experience "input") which somehow makes the
language input "comprehensible". Because he, like most, adopts Chomsky's model which
denies the relevance of associative learning processes in language learning, he has been
unable to explain what other sensory experience is needed, let alone why it is needed.
This has had a limiting effect on materials design for language learning: most language
teachers have agreed for some time that text-only materials are relatively ineffective, but
have no guiding principle for the use of multimedia except "add variety". An HSL
framework is not hampered by the false assumptions of Chomsky (1964) that are
ultimately based on ancient philosophical (rather than scientific) foundations. By treating
learning to communicate like other areas of human learning and development — in terms
of associative learning — it is possible to make specific predictions about the
effectiveness of media design for language learning materials (Coleman 2004, 2005; Crist
2008; Coleman et al. 2009).

Methodology. I began my sabbatical by blocking out and making as much
progress as possible on a book manuscript. I started by assembling notes and my existing
material (some published, some unpublished) into chapters. Then I turned to the analysis
of classroom observation reports from a Basic ESL Tutorial for which we offer as a
community service to adults in the Toledo area. It uses materials I have designed that are
based on the theories I have been developing and that I have been researching as the main
work of this sabbatical. The Tutorial is taught by graduate students in our ENGL 6940: Internship in ESL, under my supervision. As part of the activities of that course, weekly analytical reports of the practice teaching are posted in an on-line forum by the teaching interns, other graduate student observers, and myself. While a major part of the analysis focuses on teacher intern behaviors, significant parts involve the functionality of the custom-designed materials. This has given me a great deal of information about design and implementation of materials in regard to the theoretical foundations I have been developing.

Results. As I got five or six chapters into assembly of my manuscript, I found that the organizational scheme I had chosen for the manuscript resulted in too much redundancy across chapters in different ways. Background material that came up in one place had to be repeated somewhere else, because the content was not being introduced in the best order. This has led me to throw out the original organizational scheme and start over with a very different plan.

I reorganized my manuscript into four main sections: (1) The Nature of Input (reconceptualized from the logical abstractions that dominate the field to physical-domain terms), (2) The Nature of Learning (again, reconceptualized from the way it is thought of in terms of logical abstractions to an embodied view), (3) Design and Implementation of Learning Events (seen in a way that is consistent with people as physical entities communicating in their real-world environment, instead of in terms of words and grammar), and (4) Other Considerations (training people to see learning in terms of real people and events instead of in terms of disembodied words and grammar, assessing learning in terms of real communication instead of in terms of logical abstractions like
words and grammar, etc.). Under this reorganization, I completed Part 1 and most of Part 2, as well as significant sections of Parts 3 and 4.

I expect to submit presentation proposals on the topic to the 2018 Annual Convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), the 2018 annual conference of the Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States (LACUS), and the 2017 Annual Conference of Ohio TESOL, three venues in which I have been a regular presenter. (I have already submitted a related proposal to Ohio TESOL 2016.) I also expect to be able to submit a book proposal by late Fall 2016 or mid-Spring 2017.

The work of this sabbatical will significantly inform my teaching as well as my professional activity. For example, I will be teaching a course in Spring 2017 on second language acquisition theory (ENGL 6170: Applied Linguistics II). A beta version of the reassembled / reorganized book manuscript will serve as a set of core readings for that course. As another example, this entire line of research has led to continuous improvement in the design of materials used in the Basic ESL Tutorial that serves as the venue for practice teaching in our ENGL 6940: Internship in ESL.

Where the Sabbatical Leave Was Spent. I spent my sabbatical time during Spring 2016 in Toledo, OH.

References Cited


Coleman, Douglas W. and Joshua Paiz. 2010. Let's Stop Teaching ESL Students to "Sound Foreign”. Ohio TESOL Annual Conference, November 12-13, Columbus, OH.


