My position in this paper is that language is a dynamic system, has a grammar comprised of form, meaning, and use, and changes as it is used by people. The nature of language requires that cognitive and sociocultural factors influence how an individual learns a language. A language teacher should be able to focus students' attention on language form, use an awareness of students' positions within the zone of proximal development to gauge the appropriate moment to teach a particular topic with authentic tasks, and create an authentic assessment of students' knowledge through curriculum design and lesson planning. The following pages explain my position in greater detail with explanations, relevant quotes from scholarly sources, examples from my own language teaching and learning experiences, and details of how I will apply the theories of this paper to my classroom.

Language

A Dynamic System

Language is a dynamic (changing) system of systems such as grammar, phonology, and orthography. These systems can be used simultaneously such as when an orator delivers (phonology) a speech from written notes (orthography) to persuade an audience (pragmatics, grammar). Shifts in pronunciation occur over time. Consider the Northern Cities Chain Shift observed by Labov (1991), where the vowel sounds for a series of words are shifting one word down the chain. For example, someone not familiar with this trend in pronunciation shift may misunderstand the word "bus" for "boss" when it is pronounced by a speaker from Chicago. Changes in typeset can also affect a reader's comprehension, as some fonts are easier on the eyes to read than

others are. Finally, changes in grammar occur when the form, meaning, or use of a word is adjusted and the two other dimensions must also change. I will cover this change in the next section.

Because of the dynamic nature of language, it behooves the language teacher to keep abreast of the changes in the systems of the language s/he teachers. A survey of the history of English (Thomas and Tchudi, 1999), or any language for that matter, illustrates the forces at work (invasions, inventions, and influences) that make language changeable. When teaching a lesson in direct object pronouns at Concordia Language Villages, I did not teach the blanket use of the direct object pronoun "whom" whenever the grammatical category called for it. Instead, I told my students to use "who" when speaking informally with friends or even teachers when they asked, "who did you choose to lead the review session?" I told them to reserve "whom" for speeches that are more formal such as a lecture or banquet addresses, domains where use of the direct object pronoun "whom" is more fixed. I believe that students should be taught how language is used today. Teaching should be more of a thermometer rather than a thermostat for the language, describing current use, instead of perpetuating dying or archaic forms. The teacher can explain current dynamics of grammar by a triumvirate system introduced by Larsen-Freeman and Celce-Murcia (2001): form, meaning, and use.

Grammar is described by a System of Form, Meaning, and Use

A grammar of form, meaning, and use is a description of language as a dynamic system. Every utterance of language involves choices by the speaker with the form (accuracy), meaning (meaningfulness), and use (appropriateness) of what is said. In any utterance, the speaker/writer must make decisions regarding words' form, meaning, and

use. If the speaker changes one of these dimensions of grammar in the utterance, it will trigger a change in the other dimensions as well. An example of how a word's change in meaning can subsequently affect its use and form can be seen in my comparison of the word "sick" when used in a dialogue between a boy and his mother and a conversation that I had with a radio DJ on his taste in music. First, the boy with his mother:

Boy: Mommy, I don't feel so well.

Mother: Oh, you're probably sick. Climb into bed and I'll make you some soup.

Here is a transcript of part my conversation with the radio DJ:

Me: Hey, you're playing some great songs on this station!

DJ: Yea man, they're pretty sick all right. Bob Marley's one badass musician.

The form of the word "sick" did not change, both the mother and the DJ used it as an adjective. However, the meaning of "sick" changed (from ill health to awesome) and so did its use (in this case from medical to music). An ESL student who looks up the word "sick" in the most up-to-date dictionary may see the two meanings that I have mentioned here, but s/he will probably not see any notation on the appropriate contexts in which to use the different meanings. It is up to the language teacher to provide the student with the skills to determine the appropriate place or reason to use words. The necessary skill of "grammaring" (Larsen-Freeman, 1991, 2003), or negotiating the form, meaning, and use of words as they are assembled into messages, can be taught through focus on form, which I will cover in the language teaching section. For right now, the triumvirate system of grammar is able to explain the shifts in meaning, use, and form within a language.

Language Changes as it is used between People

The fact that language changes as it is used between people is related to a grammar of form, meaning, and use. Language change requires two people to agree on these three dimensions of grammar when they communicate in order for the changed combination to establish a place in the language. If only one person agrees to a particular combination of form, meaning, and use in words, then the combination is not perpetuated because it is seen by the other interlocutor as aberrant.

Two examples relating to language change and language use between people come from my summer camp experience. Summer camp participants create their own language because they comprise an insular community where members' coinage of new traditions and words can increase their status in the community. Every year at my childhood summer camp, the head counselor engraves a new word on a plaque that expresses the theme for that year. I can also remember a junior counselor who tried to introduce the word, "mayhaps" in the archaic sense of "perhaps", to the camp. Perhaps his low social rank as a new counselor was a factor in the failure of the larger camp community to adopt his proposed word, but the junior counselor could not get anyone else to perpetuate the use of "mayhaps" that summer. By the fifth of seven weeks in the camp session, this new counselor also discontinued his use of "mayhaps" and said "perhaps" when expressing doubt.

In a small way, this example of one word's acceptance and another's denial in a summer camp speech community is reflective of how an entire language can stop changing when it is not used between two people. The French equivalent of "modern languages" is *langues vivant*, literally, "living tongues". Hence, language changes as long as it is alive with use between two people. Every time I teach English and one of my

students agrees with and uses a form that I teach, it increases the number of users of that particular combination of form, meaning, and use. If no one taught it, formally in the classroom or informally as a mother teaches language to her child, and another person accepted the teaching, the language would cease to change and it would be eventually categorized with Sanskrit as only found in historical documents. Therefore, language as a dynamic system involves the teachers and learners of it, too. In the next section, I will outline my position on language learning inside and outside of the classroom.

Language Learning

I believe that language learning occurs in the following way. The human mind is equipped with the capacity to communicate. This capacity is awakened and enlarged as the mind detects patterns, and changes in those patterns, in the external environment. When the pattern of language is too large, or the capacity of the mind is too small to comprehend it, the learner requires some form of assistance to internalize the pattern. Based on their previous experiences, learners will have individual differences in how they learn language. Once the capacity to understand has grown, the learner is able to comprehend further variations in the pattern, compare them, and arrive at a working definition of the language feature. This process repeats itself over a lifetime as new patterns emerge to refine each definition.

Before I discuss how the mind begins to learn language, I first want to establish the mind's capacity to learn language. Thoughts, in their earliest inkling, may take shape through language, but babies are not born pre-programmed with their mother's language. Pinker contends that the brain thinks in a "mentalese" (the representation of

concepts in the brain) that can take shape in the first or primary language that the individual learns (1995). The smallest form of language that carries meaning is the morpheme. Words, composed of one or more morphemes, cannot be pieced together at random like lottery balls spinning out of the mix machine, and automatically form a meaningful sentence. Furthermore, Pinker contends that the mind does not piece together sentences word by word. Instead, the mind categorizes words and phrases into categories that follow set rules governing how they can fit together to convey meaning. I agree with him. This "grammar" is known as a discrete combinatorial system. Pinker explains this term as, "a finite number of discrete elements (in this case, words) are sampled, combined, and permuted to create larger structures (in this case, sentences) with properties that are quite distinct from those of their elements" (Pinker, 1995). Therefore, the mind can detect, receive, combine, and produce patterns in language that may or may not have existed before. With this capacity to process language patterns, the mind learns language.

Affordance

The nature of language as a system of systems that undergoes gradual, and sometimes abrupt, change affords learning opportunities for the individuals who encounter it. By affordance, I mean something that is used by an individual to accomplish a task or fulfill a need. "Affordance refers to what is available to the person to do something with," (van Lier, 2004, p. 91). This concept is important to understand for my teaching practice because it explains the first connections that learners make with the target language. Here are a few examples from my own experience of how such connections have been made.

Outside the classroom, affordances can be situations or objects that can be used by the speaker to accomplish a communicative task. For example, I remember how I learned the meaning of "listos" in Spanish while on vacation in Mexico. I was waiting outside of a roadside restaurant in the Chihuahuan Desert for the driver of my bus to return from his meal. Other passengers were waiting with me, so the only condition precluding us from continuing on our journey was the readiness of the bus driver. As the bus driver approached us, he said, "listos?" A man said, "listo". A woman said, "lista". Everyone else turned around, got on the bus, and we continued on our way.

The situation was like a three-dimensional fill-in-the-blank exercise. I had ridden buses in the USA where the same situation occurred and the bus driver said, "ready?" I matched the third-person plural, the masculine singular, and the feminine singular forms of the Spanish adjective "listo" with their meaning in English because the proximity of the bus, driver, and waiting passengers afforded me the opportunity to make a connection between the meanings in two languages.

Inside the classroom, affordances come through the decorations, furniture, and materials that students have at their disposal for communicative use. Some of the first phrases that I learned in my Japanese class at Monterey Peninsula College were, "open/close your book", "please sit down", and "close the door". I learned all of these phrases in tandem with my use of objects in the room (desk, door, and chair) that enable students and the teacher to perform basic classroom functions.

As a teacher who is about to teach English as a foreign language in English, my students will need to take advantage of similar affordances to increase their capacity to learn the language. However, the students will need help from more than just objects in

the classroom. They will need personal assistance from the teacher. All but the most autonomous language learners need some kind of personal help in order to notice and make use of affordances. The process by which indirect aid (such as from teacher to student) helps an individual to connect with the outside world is know as mediation (Lantolf, 2000).

Mediation

By observing the outside help that s/he gives to a student, the teacher is able to see what kinds of things the learner will be able to do in the future. By looking at what an individual can do unassisted as the history of their development, and what the individual can do with assistance as the future of their development, the teacher can use this knowledge to design lesson plans for his/her classroom because s/he knows the student's range of abilities with and without assistance. This range of abilities is known as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The originator of the ZPD concept, Vygotsky, describes it as "the distance between the actual development as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers," (1978, p. 86). The ZPD illuminates the core tenet of sociocultural theory (SCT): The mind does not develop from direct interaction with the outside world but requires mediation, indirect contact, through tools and signs to develop.

Van Lier's (1996) neo-Vygotskyian model of the ZPD expands the number of relationships that mediate mental development and, by extension, language learning. There are four relationships in his model: interaction with equally able peers, interaction with less capable peers, assistance from a more capable peer (or expert), and inner

resources. An example of equally able peers can be classmates engaged in pair work with negotiation of meaning to accomplish a task. Similarly, interaction with a less capable peer can be a tutoring session, where the tutor actually learns something from the tutee. Assistance from an expert is the relationship of teacher imparting knowledge while giving help to a student. Finally, inner resources include metacognitive (how to think) strategies, such as the metacognitive awareness guide (MCAG) that I modified from Guterman (2002) in section B1 of this portfolio, as a way to assist students on the reading comprehension portion of a placement test. The MCAG activates learning strategies within the learner. All of these mediational relationships can be present in a school or even a classroom to enrich the developmental opportunities for students.

One example of multiple mediational relationships contributing to language development within a school activity is the Great Grammar Exchange. It involved all levels of ESL students and the MA TESOL candidates at MIIS. In the activity, the first level of ESL students asked the next level's students a question about a particular grammar feature. The second level students worked together to design an activity to teach the grammar point to the first level students and then asked the third level students the same grammar question. This procedure continued up the chain until it reached the "experts": MA TESOL students. By the end of the activity, three relationships in the neo-Vygotskyian model of the ZPD had occured, interaction with: equal peers, less capable peers, and peers that are more capable. For the teacher supervising the entire activity, it must have revealed the present and future abilities of the students involved. From his observations of the students' abilities, the professor could plan appropriate language learning or teacher training activities that fit within the

ZPD of the students involved. Because it informs the teacher of the appropriate activities to conduct when teaching, the ZPD and the concept of mediation are an integral part of the language learning process.

Emergence

Emergence is the moment at which each language learner arrives when s/he has used an affordance and experienced a microgenesis, or a change from other-regulated performance (with help from someone else) to self-regulated performance (doing something alone) (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994), through activity supported by interaction with a partner of equal, less, or more skill. However, emergence is not a fixed moment in time nor an arrival at the same understanding of a definition or grammar structure for each learner. In fact, Hopper (1998) writes that

> [Emergence] is not intended to be a standard sense of origins or genealogy, not an historical question of how the grammar came to be the way it is, but instead, it takes the adjective emergent seriously as a continual movement toward structure, a postponement or deferral of structure, a view of structure as always provisional […] (p. 159)

To illustrate this definition of emergence, I will go back to my example of learning the Spanish word "listo" through affordances. I thought "listo" was a conjugation of the verb "listir" until I tried to confirm this with an interpreter from Spain and a friend of Central American heritage. The Spaniard told me that it was an adjective with different variations of use in Spain and Mexico. My other friend told me it was from the verb "alistar". Determining which response is correct was less important than my raised awareness that resulted from conducting the inquiry because emergence

is always a continual movement towards structure using a working definition. Hitherto, I had been able to use the word appropriately with invented grammar. My future use of it may change now that I have a new awareness of its grammatical function. Hence, I experienced emergence in my use of "listos". Students may experience emergence in the language classroom in different ways because they all have different needs and learning styles but must participate in the same activity designed by one teacher.

In my own language classroom, I will design activities that appeal to a wide spectrum of learning styles (kinesthetic, visual, aural, etc) so that students experience an environment saturated with affordances and mediational relationships to arrive at a moment of microgenesis. Not all of the students may experience the same affordances and mediational relationships because they have individual differences (Skehan, 1989). It is difficult for a teacher to attend to the different learning styles of all his/her students at one time. Because of this difficulty, one of my favorite classroom activities is stations.

In the stations activity, small tasks are located throughout the room. I form the students into groups and they rotate from activity to activity every few minutes. The students work at different stations simultaneously and perform tasks that cater to a wide variety of learning styles. The students direct their own learning by attending the stations that resonate with their own learning style, thereby making the activity learner centered. In addition, the students broaden their ability to learn in different ways by studying the topic from multiple perspectives. At the end of the activity, I debrief the students about their learning experiences and bring a sense of closure to the event. This combination of learner-centered activity (Nunan, 1988) and teacher-facilitated orientation and debriefing should precipitate emergence in each learner on some aspect

of the target language in focus for the activity. I will use the next section of this paper to describe the teacher's role in the language learning process.

Language Teaching

I have illustrated my model of language learning and elaborated on three significant steps in the process (affordance, mediation, and emergence). I would now like to cover three aspects of my language teaching practice. They are based on my position that language is a dynamic system and language learning requires cognitive and sociocultural considerations. First, I contend that grammar instruction should include focus on form with an emphasis on meaning. Second, teachers should begin their lesson planning with the end assessment in mind. Third, teachers should design activities that progress from closed to open answers with an authentic task as the ultimate activity to prepare the learners for real life encounters with the target language.

Focus on Form

Instruction that focuses students' attention on form while maintaining a goal of meaning is an effective way to teach grammar. Simply put, focus on form "overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (Ellis, 2001, p. 4). This method of grammar instruction is based on two principles that I have already established in this paper. One is that grammar is a triumvirate system of form, meaning, and use. The second is that language learning begins with conscious noticing of affordances in the environment. Furthermore, the goal of focus on form instruction is to improve meaning or communication, not just to memorize a certain form. I believe focus on form

instruction is an appropriate method for language teaching because it enables students to make grammatical decisions regarding form while paying attention to meaning and therefore use the language appropriately.

There are many ways that teaching through focus on form can take shape. Each teacher informed in the method must make several decisions based on the grammatical feature to be taught, the material containing the feature, and the needs of the students who are interacting with the material through which to learn the grammatical feature. Some of these decisions include:

- Implicit vs. explicit grammar instruction, such as enhancing a text by underlining all past simple verbs and asking students to detect the pattern vs. writing an advance organizer and talking about the simple past tense as a class
- Proactive vs. reactive teaching, such as anticipating students' errors and teaching the correct form of the error vs. handling students' errors or topics of interest as they come up in class (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

I have used focus on form instruction in my own teaching practice. For example, I taught a mini-lesson on the past tense (simple aspect) with two classmates in my Structure of English course at MIIS. The lesson included an advance organizer to explicitly introduce the past tense (simple aspect) form in verbs and included examples. Next, we passed out a short article about shark research at the local aquarium with numerous examples of the past tense (simple aspect) verb form enhanced by underlining. The students worked in groups by reading sections of the article and sharing their findings of other past tense (simple aspect) verb forms in their section with

their group members. Finally, the students completed a worksheet by listing the past simple verbs, identifying whether the verb was regular or irregular, and changing the form of the verb into the present simple form. This example illustrates how I used implicit and explicit instruction, as well as proactive teaching, to transfer knowledge about the grammatical feature of past tense (simple aspect).

Using the ZPD to determine when to use Authentic Tasks

A task is something to do using language that has a clear goal or end. A task is authentic if it engages the learner with the real world or simulates the real world with language used in the real world. Authentic tasks should be the ultimate activity that language teachers give their students in order to master a language form, but it shouldn't always be the first task that students encounter when learning that form. I think that teachers should first give students tasks that are initially controlled, having fewer choices to make in deciding appropriate form. Then, the teacher should gradually give students some tasks that are more open and free, which allow a variety of responses. Finally, students should go out into the real world to practice their language under the supervision of the teacher so that s/he will be available if help is necessary.

My students and I got a lot of practice with authentic tasks at summer camp where experiential learning is prevalent. In experiential learning, students learn by doing (Jerald and Clark, 1989). For example, in one language lesson, I drove my students in a van to the ice cream shop. Then, I purposefully got lost, required the students to read a map, and then give me directions back to camp. However, there was a lot of preparation work involved with getting the students ready for this activity.

I was aware of the students' readiness to perform an authentic task because I had taken notes on their ZPD in the days leading up to this activity. The first day, I introduced the vocabulary of cardinal directions, questions, and commands to use when asking/giving directions. The second day, I created fill-in-the-gap worksheets with a simple map and gave them to the students indoors. The third day, I gave the students a map of the campus and ask them to direct me to the classroom along a regular route that we took each day. Each of these days included activities that the students did alone and activities in which I helped them. I knew what they could do by themselves and I noticed that my assistance to them was diminishing day by day. I knew that it would not be such a risk to let them try giving directions in the real world on their own, with me driving. I was right. My students led me back to camp and were very proud of themselves for using their new English skills with cardinal directions. By designing tasks that started with controlled operations, increasingly demanded more responsibility from the learners in choosing the language forms on their own, and ended with an authentic task, I was able to give them a real-life experience where they used the target language form that I taught them in the classroom. Based on my knowledge of the students' ZPD, I chose the appropriate moment to give the authentic task to the students when they were capable of completing it.

Curriculum Design and Lesson Planning for Authentic Assessment

Now that I have explained an exemplified how I will design authentic tasks and their accompanying grammar instruction, I would like to conclude this section by

discussing how I will design lesson plans and curricula to produce artifacts for inclusion in an authentic assessment, such as a portfolio. First, I begin with the end in mind. By this I mean, that I envision how the model student's portfolio will look with its possible contents that have been selected according to grading criteria that I have established. Then, I work my way back to the curriculum and locate the days when the student may have the opportunity to create an artifact for the portfolio. I can locate the day according to the type of work done in class and the grading criteria for the portfolio. Next, I begin planning my lesson by writing out the terminal objectives (what the students will accomplish by the end of the lesson) and then determining the enabling objectives (what the students will need to know or what skills they will need to have in order to accomplish the tasks in the lesson) to get each student to produce a product that is eligible for the portfolio.

Another logistical consideration that the teacher must consider are the materials needed for the student to physically create an essay or complete a handout (Jolly and Bolitho, 1998). At Concordia Language Villages, sometimes my lesson planning would start with what materials were available to generate activities and then I would plan a lesson in this bottom-up fashion. However, my driving question to decide content was, "what can my students produce in this class that will be able to go into the portfolio?" In order to go into the portfolio, an artifact has to be in a presentable condition that allows the reader to observe what the student learned from the activity. An example of such an artifact could be the rough draft and final version of a thank you letter that one of my students included in her portfolio, which is included in section C of this portfolio.

Authentic assessment can provide a guiding light for teachers to design their curriculum and lesson plans because the nature of the measurement device requires the student to show what s/he has learned by evaluating existing assignments from the course (Hart, 1994). The teacher's job is to provide the students with an abundant supply of material from which they can choose artifacts that illustrate their progress and achievement in the course. The ideal portfolio assessment is a window into the student's ability to master the coursework.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described aspects of language, language learning, and language teaching that comprise my professional practice. I would like to write about more topics, but I have kept to the most salient and relevant ones for the time being. Any position paper is just a snapshot in the educational philosophy of a teacher. In five years, my position paper may be quite different from what it is now. The important thing is that each teacher should reevaluate his/her position on the subject, means, and methods of his/her practice and explicate them from time to time in order to have a truly reflective teaching practice. In this way, the language teacher will have a practice that can keep up with the changing nature of his/her field and enjoy a career that is relevant, informed, and fulfilling. (Word Count: 4944)

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